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MIKE SHAYNE MYSTERY MAGAZINE

AUGUST, 1974
VOL. 35, No. 3

NEW MIKE SHAYNE SHORT NOVEL

THE MURDER OF A GHOST

by BRETT HALLIDAY

From the bright morning light, into the dim confines of the medium's house, Mike Shayne and his friends stepped into a bizarre world, where a dead man was first brought back to life, and then left murdered at the detective's feet, while the medium vanished!

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Complete

THE NEW MIKE SHAYNE SHORT NOVEL

Fourteen people were at the table when the lights went off. When they came back on, there was one more. The man Mike Shayne had been hired to find. As promised, the Medium had brought Philip Mann back. Not from the dead—just dead.

by Brett Halliday

MADAME YOLANDE evidently did very well at her trade. In the bright morning light her home was neither spooky nor tumbledown. It was an almost new, sixty-five thousand dollar, development house in the south west section of Dade County.

The homes around it were on one acre plots. The Madame's big house was a bit more embowered in heavy tropical ornamental plantings than the others, but that was all that set it apart—at least externally.

There were half a dozen luxury model cars in the drive when Mike Shayne, Lucy Hamilton, and Tim Rourke arrived in Shayne's car.

As the trio stepped from the car, Lucy Hamilton looked up at the imposing facade. "Are you sure this is the right house, Michael," she asked. "It doesn't look like any medium's place I've ever been to."

Shayne grinned at his brown haired secretary. "It's the right place, Angel. This medium isn't your run of the mill palm reader. From what I hear, she caters only to the very wealthy."

Tim Rourke grunted. His hands in his pockets, the reporter looked at the front door of

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THE MURDER OF A GHOST

the residence with skepticism on his face. "I should have known when you told me Philip Mann's family had hired you and wanted you to come to this seance that it wouldn't be a common palm reader."

"It wasn't the family, Tim," Lucy corrected him. "It was their lawyers."

"Same thing," Rourke said. "From what I hear, the whole kit and caboodle—family, lawyers, business, everything—is run by Serena Mann, the old boy's sister. If any one of them so much as speak, it's only to echo Serena, or with her full approval."

Shayne smiled crookedly. "Well, whoever runs the show, the lawyers are supposed to be inside—not out here. Let's go in."

The maid who opened the door took Lucy's wrap and then silently ushered the group into a large foyer. Several rooms, wide double-doors parted, opened off the entry.

To the right, the space usually called a "Florida room" had been converted to an area for holding seances.

The glass doors to the rear of the foyer fronted on the pool and patio, and had been closed. The foyer's walls were covered by heavy black velvet hangings embroidered with gold and crimson signs of the zodiac.

To the left only a single door leading into the main living room of the house was open, and it, too, had been covered with black velvet.

Within the room incense burned in bronze jars set on small tables along the walls. It was too heavy and over-sweet for Mike Shayne's taste.

As Lucy Hamilton, Shayne and Rourke were ushered into the room two men wearing identical charcoal grey suits and grave expressions approached them. "Mr. Shayne," one of the men said. "Thank you for coming."

"It's all right, Mr. Harcourt," Shayne replied. "These are the two friends I told you I wanted to have present. Miss Hamilton and Mr. Rourke."

"Of the *Miami Daily News*," Mr. Harcourt said distrustfully as he shook Tim Rourke's hands.

"That's right," the veteran reporter said.

"Well, whatever happens, I'm sure you understand that it isn't for, uh, publication. You are here only to witness the proceedings."

The man's warning tone didn't disturb Rourke. "Do you really expect anything newsworthy to happen tonight?" he asked.

The lawyer looked truly thoughtful. "I don't know. I re-

ally don't know. I tried to dissuade Miss Serena from. . ." He hesitated. "Well, that's neither here nor there. She has Mr. George's full support. Only natural. Now, Mr. Shayne, before I introduce you to the others, please be assured that you have been hired only to find Mr. Philip Mann.

"You were invited to attend tonight's seance not for publicity purposes, but simply because we knew the whole family would be present, and because. . .well, because quite frankly, Miss Serena Mann insisted.

"She has a religious turn of mind, you understand, one that believes in such things as spirits. Mr. George wants everything possible done to allay her. . .fears and to please her. She feels strongly that tonight there will be some word of her missing brother. But you do understand that this is all strictly business? You will be paid for your time."

Shayne grinned at the man's discomfort. "If Serena Mann wants to pay me to attend a seance I'm glad to oblige. And like you say, it's a chance to meet the family."

"Precisely," the lawyer relaxed. "Now, if you'll follow us." The two lawyers led the way into the living room.

A large mahogony table, bare and surrounded by a circle of fourteen chairs, dominated the room.

Against the side wall was a "Medium's Cabinet" of a type the big redhead had seen before. It was just a wooden framework, heavily draped with black velvet and containing a single wooden chair.

Mr. Harcourt began introducing Shayne to the group inside the room, while his partner, Mr. Smith, followed with Lucy and Rourke.

There was Philip Mann's granddaughter Sue—very blonde and blue eyed and sparkling with youth and health—and her mother, Alice, whose dyed golden locks did a very poor job of making her look like her daughter. Sue's brother, Peter Mann, stood quietly between them.

Next came Philip Mann's brother, George, sullen and spoiled-looking for his years and looking very much the sportsman gone to seed. He sat beside their sister, Serena, who wore a heavy black veil through which she watched the company with the suppressed intensity of a jaquar about to pounce.

Shayne eyed Serena Mann with directness before Mr. Harcourt moved on to introduce the detective to an ancient and tottering sprite of a man whom he

introduced as simply "Old Peter". He had been the missing man's valet and confidante and had stayed with the family during the years since his master had walked out of the house one Spring evening—never to be seen again by any of his kith and kin.

That was now seven years back, and no effort either by the police or a long string of private detectives, of whom Shayne was the last, had found any solution to the mystery.

There were only two other outsiders present—Mrs. Wills and Mrs. Carder—who were regular financial backers of the medium and attended all of her seances.

"Now that Mr. Shayne is here," said Serena Mann in a quiet yet authoritative voice, "perhaps we should all be seated and not waste any more time. Waste is sinful."

As though they had been commanded by an Army sergeant, the family and even the medium's two financial backers scuttled to their seats. Only George Mann seemed to take his time, but even he moved to his chair.

Lucy Hamilton and Tim Rourke found seats together, and Mike Shayne ambled his way to a vacant chair near the head of the table. He could see Serena Mann watching him, though her face was only turned three quarters to him.

He nodded to her, and she quickly averted her head. Thoughtfully Mike Shayne tugged at his left ear lobe. She seemed to be a very worried woman, indeed, and more than just a little nervous.

At that moment the lights in the room suddenly dimmed until it was just possible to see enough to move about.

That was the signal for Madame Yolande to make her planned dramatic entrance —and it was a dramatic entrance indeed.

The medium was taller than most women, with a startlingly voluptuous figure, magnificent breasts and long slim legs. Her face was an oval of classic beauty, with intense black eyes and shoulder length black hair. Her age was anywhere from forty to sixty but her whole bearing was vibrant with life and energy.

To Shayne's surprise Yolande did not wear the traditional dark, flowing robes favored by so many of her profession. Instead she wore a long, stylishly cut red velvet evening gown. The neck was cut low to show her beautiful figure and the double rope of pearls around her neck. Her only concession to tradition was a shoulder length veil of gold net which

covered, without concealing, her head and face.

Without a word, Madame Yolande sat at the head of the long table. Shayne thought again how beautiful she appeared even in that dim light.

"All the doors to this room are locked," Yolande said in a voice that might have been European or South American. "That is so that you may be sure I have no human assistants during our sitting. The maid who showed you in has been dismissed. She was hired only for tonight. She will not be back."

Madame Yolande slid a chain with several keys on it down the long table to where Tim Rourke sat.

"You will hold the keys until the sitting is over. The lights are automatically timed to go out in just a moment. Do not be afraid then. This room is air conditioned. I can turn the lights on if we need them. There is nothing in darkness itself to alarm or harm you." Her voice was as reassuring as a doctor's bedside manner.

"What is going to happen?" Lucy Hamilton asked.

"That will depend upon the Spirits," Madame Yolande said in solemn tones. "When the lights go out, we will all join hands and ask them to bring us word from our missing friend

and relative Mr. Philip Mann. Everyone just sit quietly and mentally ask the good spirits to help. That is all I ask of you."

"What will happen?" said a voice. Shayne thought this was one of the lawyers.

"I cannot tell you in advance," Yolande repeated. "I believe that the spirits who so often come to visit me will come again tonight. I will ask them about Philip Mann, and I hope that they will tell us where and how he is. Now be silent for the moment approaches."

The lights went out.

II

THE DARKNESS in the seance room was absolute. Even after several minutes, Mike Shayne could hardly make out anything at all. He felt Sue Mann's

small firm fingers holding on to his right hand.

Mrs. Alice Mann was holding his left hand. As the darkness fell she twined her fingers into his. Her hand was hot and dry and she began to press and caress his big hand. This was something Shayne hadn't expected. It was a familiar physical advance that had nothing whatever to do with spirits or seances.

Alice Mann was a widow, but Mike Shayne doubted if she had ever been a lonely one.

The first moment of darkness stretched out into long minutes. Nothing could be seen and the only sound was an occasional deep breath or sigh from someone at the table.

Then it happened.

First there was a sudden ringing note like the striking of a large brass gong. It was so loud and so unexpected that everyone jumped—even Mike Shayne. The hands he was holding let loose and he had to grope for them in the dark.

As the shivering note died away, a dim light appeared in the center of the big table. Shayne couldn't quite place the source. It didn't come out of the table or shine down on it like a spotlight.

The light was simply there. It was very dim at first and then began to glow a little. It seemed to shine out of something on the table itself. As the light strengthened, he could see what that object was.

Lying in the center of the table and dimly revealed by what seemed to be a self-generated light was an old fashioned fighting knife or dagger.

Shayne recognized it at once. It was of a type manufactured by the tens of thousands in Sheffield, England, in the mid-years of the last century. Because of an ornate silver hilt much like that of a table carving knife, it was called a "Tiffany Bowie". There was nothing ornate about the blade. It was ten inches long, of the familiar bowie shape and razor edged.

This was a knife for fighting—a knife for killing.

Shayne looked again, trying to pierce the dim light. Was there a wet stain on the blade? He strained his eyes.

The dim light faded, then reappeared. Now it seemed to be floating a few feet off the floor in mid air over in the general direction of the medium's cabinet. Yolande wasn't in the cabinet, she was still at the head of the table.

The light got a little brighter. This time it emanated from something besides the knife.

A human face, a man's,

began to shape itself inside the ball of glowing light. It became more visible.

From Shayne's right there came a terrible high pitched scream of pure, unadulterated fear that almost froze the marrow in his bones. It was Alice's scream and after it the same voice cried out:

"Philip! It's Philip! Oh my God. No, Philip, no! It isn't me. . . . . ." And then another terrible scream.

Then silence again.

The light and with it the ghastly face it shrouded vanished and the room was again in pitch dark laced by those awful screams.

Shayne pushed back his chair and stood up. Around him he could hear others doing the same. People began to move about. Someone, probably trying to find a door, ran full tilt into the wall.

Voices were calling: "Lights." "Open the doors."

Shayne expected Madame Yolande to respond, but there was no sound of her voice.

Then he groped for the little pen-sized pocket flashlight he wore in the breast pocket of his jacket. The light was small and the room filled with confused and frightened figures, but it let him see enough to find the door by which Yolande had entered and the wall switch under the velvet hangings by the door.

The first thing he saw when the lights went on was the body face down on the black carpet. The big Tiffany Bowie was driven inches deep into the back between the shoulder blades.

Mike Shayne raised his voice in a great bull-bellow. "Freeze," he shouted. "Everybody stand right where you are. Don't move a step. Don't do anything at all unless I say to do it. Everything's going to be okay."

His commanding tone got their attention and the group froze in place like some grotesque tableau. Then they saw the body on the floor and gradually their faces whitened with fear.

"Stay where you are," Shayne said in calm authoritative tones. He showed them the big Colt's automatic he had taken from the belt holster under his jacket. "Don't be afraid. Nobody else is going to get killed. No screaming now. Just freeze."

Mike Shayne's voice held them in their places. He made a quick, professional scan of the room. There had been fourteen persons seated around the seance table. Counting the body on the floor there were still fourteen people in the room. But Madame Yolande was gone.

The body lay belly-down on the floor with its face pressed into the deep pile of the black carpet so that the features were obscured.

Shayne crossed the room very quietly and gently turned the head of the body so the face could be seen. It was a man's face. There was a collective sigh of pure horror from the others in the room. Shayne recognized the features. Only moments before he had seen them revealed dimly in the flickering ghost light of the seance.

"It's my grandfather," said young Peter Mann at Mike Shayne's elbow. "This is Philip Mann. The spirits brought him back."

"Rejected," snapped Serena Mann. A strange smile played on her lips. "God judges," she concluded, "and He has sent Philip back."

"Humph," George Mann snorted.

"Somebody brought him back," Mike Shayne said, "or maybe he just brought himself." He bent down to examine the body. It was still warm. Blood was still seeping out into his clothing around the blade of the knife where it stuck in his back. The man was dead. There was no trace of pulse or respiration.

"If this is Philip Mann," the detective said, "he's obviously dead but he hasn't been dead long. My guess is that he was killed in this room minutes ago."

"Are you suggesting one of us killed him? Alice Mann asked, her eyebrows raised. "That's impossible. We're not murderers."

"It's not impossible," said Peter Mann. "It's not even improbable. Who else could have done it but someone in this room?"

Shayne noted that he alone of all the group was sitting at the big table. Everyone else was standing.

Shayne tried to remember if Peter Mann had been at the table when the lights came on, but things had been moving too fast. He couldn't be sure.

"Somebody must have come into the room while the lights were off," Peter Mann continued.

"Not likely," Tim Rourke said. "He'd have had to open a door to get in and light would have showed. Unless he was hidden back of those drapes all the time."

Shayne didn't think that last was likely. He knew he would have noticed a bulge back of the drapes big enough to be caused by a human body, even if that person was standing flat against the wall.

"It was the spirits," Serena

Mann said from behind her veil. "And, they have taken Madame Yolande."

The crowd stirred again, noticing the medium's absence for the first time.

"Everybody stay right where you are," Shayne quieted them. "I'll look for Madame Yolande."

It didn't take the big man long to locate the beautiful medium. When he opened the drapes which shrouded the "spirit cabinet" against the wall, she was seated there in the single straight chair, in a relaxed posture.

Her head lolled back against the wall and her eyes were closed. There was blood on her face and neck. She was still alive, though. Shayne could see the rise and fall of her beautiful breasts inside the tight velvet dress.

"Tim," he called to his friend, "she's alive. Have you still got those keys she tossed you?"

"They're in my pocket."

"Then unlock the door to this place and get to a phone. Call Will Gentry and tell him to send out the Homicide Squad. Tell him to send a doctor and an ambulance too. I'm afraid Madame Yolande here has been pretty badly hurt."

"What about the rest of us?" Serena Mann asked.

"The rest of us are all going to stay right here in this room till the police get here," Mike Shayne said.

"Do you have the authority to give orders here?" Mrs. Wills, one of Madame Yolande's wealthy patronesses, said. "This is a shocking affair. I need to get home and rest."

"Not before the police get here," big Mike Shayne said to Mrs. Wills as gently as he could. "This is a shocking affair as you just said. It's also Murder One."

III

UNTIL THE POLICE arrived, Mike Shayne stayed close to the unconscious Madame Yolande. The woman had suffered a severe blow on the left side of her head and brow, and at first the big man feared there might have been a severe concussion. However, within a few minutes her breathing became more normal and she began to show signs of recovery.

By the time the sound of approaching police sirens was heard outside the house her eyes were open, though she still seemed confused and was not trying to talk.

Shayne turned her over then to Lucy Hamilton's care, and went to the front of the house to meet his old friend Will Gentry.

The burly Chief of Police

drew Shayne aside as the detectives and coroner's men hurried past into the seance room.

"What have you got here this time, Mike?" the Chief asked. "Tim Rourke was telling me some bull about a ghost killing a ghost. Are we expected to swallow that?"

"Right now I don't even know just what happened exactly," Shayne said. "I was right there in the room, but everything happened pretty quickly. I saw things that need to have a reasonable explanation. Did Tim tell you who the corpse was?"

"He said it was the missiong millionaire, Philip Mann. We've got a file on him six inches thick at Headquarters. I remember the ruckus there was when he vanished years ago. We did everything but net the Gulf stream trying to find the body."

"Well, you can close that file now," Shayne said. "The body's on the floor in the next room. His family identified it. There's also a room full of suspects for you to sort out."

"All family?" Gentry asked.

"Except the lawyers and two visitors," Shayne answered. "Though I doubt that the Madame's two girl friends had any motive. Then there's Lucy and Tim and me."

"That leaves all his relatives and lawyers. What do you know about them?"

"The lawyers? They hired me to find old Philip Mann. His sister, Serena, asked them to. Between you and me though, Will, I think what the whole family really hoped I would prove he was dead!"

"How's that?"

"From what the lawyers told me, Will, Philip Mann left everything tied up in trusts and holding companies. His sister and his lawyers make most of the decisions. Serena seems to have the lawyers under her thumbs, pretty much."

"What happened if Philip was proved dead?" The bulky Chief of Police asked.

"If he was proved dead, the family would be free. Of him *and* Serena. And damned wealthy to boot."

"So they all have motives," Gentry concluded.

"Exactly," Shayne said. "Every last one of them."

Gentry snorted. "Beautiful. Exactly what I needed tonight."

Shayne grinned at his friend. "It's not that bad, Will. I think you can discount the lawyers, the old servant, the two old ladies, Rourke, Lucy and myself. And the medium. That only leaves you five suspects."

"And all of them big shots," Gentry nodded wearily.

"A religious fanatic, a

slightly nympho widow, her two children, and one pudgy businessman—

"Nympho widow. . . .?" Gentry started to ask.

Just at that moment the two white coated ambulance men came out of the seance room carrying Madame Yolande, on a stretcher. They paused by the two friends.

"We're taking her down to Jackson hospital for a check up, Chief," the young interne said. "There doesn't seem to be any real damage, but we want to make sure."

The medium struggled under the sheet which confined her limbs. "I don't want to go."

"If you're okay they'll release you in a few hours," Chief Gentry reassured her. "Can you tell us who hit you?"

"It was pitch dark," she said. "I saw no one."

She beckoned to Mike Shayne. As he bent over the stretcher she said in a low tone: "Poor Philip. Poor, poor Philip."

Then before Shayne could straighten up, her lips barely moved and she added: "Come see me. Important," in tones so low that no one could possibly have overheard.

As the two men picked up the stretcher again, Will Gentry called to one of his plainclothes men: "Ride down in the ambulance with her, Pat, and

stay outside the hospital room. I want her under guard all the time till she's released." The detective followed the stretcher out.

Gentry and Shayne turned towards the seance room once more.

This time they were interrupted by Detective Lieutenant Maine who was Chief Gentry's constant driver and right bower.

The Lieutenant stopped his boss. "We've got our man, Chief."

"What?"

"At least we have a confession."

A uniformed patrolman followed the Lieutenant out of the

murder room. With him was "Old Peter", the murdered man's long-time confidential servant.

The old man looked up at the big chief and said in quavering tones. "Poor Mr. Philip. I killed him. I killed him."

The two big men looked at each other with carefully controlled poker faces. Finally Will Gentry looked away.

"Take him downtown," he said to his men, "but don't book him, yet, and don't put him in a cell. Just keep an eye on him till I get there. I'll want to talk to him alone in my office."

The detectives led the old man away.

George Mann and the two attorneys, Brown and Harcourt, were the next to come out of the inner room.

"I ask that you let the dead man's family leave now," Brown said. "You have a confession which clears them."

"There are still some questions. . ."

"We understand that, Chief Gentry," Harcourt interrupted. "We know about the routine and we will make our clients available at their home or at our offices. Right now we ask only that you consider the delicate sensibilities of the ladies and the great shock all these people have suffered.

"Especially Miss Serena. She's been under a great strain ever since her brother disappeared. They were very close, and it has affected her. . .mind. Fortunately, it has only driven her to religion. However, I'm afraid this shock may prove too much. She is a frail woman, despite her business acumen.

"And I needn't remind you that both Mrs. Alice Mann and Mr. George Mann are also under a great strain. The notoriety, the disturbance, could prove most unfortunate. Most unfortunate. Let them go and rest in familiar surroundings."

The big Chief shrugged. "I guess that will be all right," he said, "just so long as you understand that fellow's confession may not end this case. Tell your clients not to leave town and to hold themselves available. I certainly will want to talk to them later on."

IV

A FEW MINUTES after the Mann family had left the death house, Mike Shayne, Will Gentry, Lucy Hamilton and Tim Rourke were in the seance room where the coroner's men were getting ready to take the body away for an autopsy.

"The first thing we have to find out is how the late Philip Mann got into this room to be killed," Gentry said. "That is, if

he wasn't already hidden in here someplace even before the seance got started.

"He wasn't," Shayne said. "We all looked around carefully for any hidden devices. Anything as big as a *man* would have been spotted by one of us. I think it'll be easy enough to find out how he got in," Shayne pointed out. "A room this size is bound to have more than one door into the main house. All we have to do is look behind these black drapes to find it."

That proved to be the case.

There was a door in the wall only a few feet to the right of where the medium's cabinet stood. This one was unlocked and led into the kitchen area of the home. Down at the far end of the room was another door back of more hangings. This one led to the big double garage at the end of the house. It was locked and bolted at the living room side.

Of course one whole side of the room was composed of sliding glass doors leading out of the pool and patio area. These were all secured on the inside by patent locks. Anyone coming in that way would have had to let in light when he came through the heavy black drapes.

Point of access had to have been the door near the little cabinet.

"I think we can assume that Philip Mann came in this way," Shayne said.

"That still leaves a lot of questions," Tim Rourke said. "Did Philip come in of his own will or did the killer drive him in at gun or knife point? Was he killed outside the room and carried in to be dumped here? If he came in by himself did his murderer follow him in or was he already here and waiting?"

"You sound like a District Attorney," Shayne said.

"No," smiled Lucy Hamilton, "just a newspaperman. Those are all questions that have to be answered sooner or later. What do you think, Michael?"

Shayne looked at her and laughed. "I think you're perfectly right, Angel. Anyway, maybe we can dispose of a few of the questions right off the bat."

The room was full of light now that the hangings covering the glass doors had been pulled down. The view was of a perfectly normal swimming pool with a backdrop of colorful tropical bloom. The heavy, brooding air of gloom and menace that had filled the seance room was gone.

"First of all," Mike Shayne said, "I think Philip Mann walked into this room on his own two feet and of his own volition. Remember we all saw

his face framed in that strange light for at least a full minute before he was killed. That wasn't the face of a corpse. It was alive even with all the hokus-pokus that was going on. It was a calm face—not that of a man who knows or even suspects that he's in deadly danger of being killed at any minute."

"Then you think Philip Mann set up this seance business himself as a dramatic stunt to bring himself back into the family?" Gentry said.

"I wouldn't be surprised," Shayne said. "If so, his killer had to know about it in advance and be here waiting for him."

"Someone else who would have to know is that beautiful Madame Yolande," Gentry said. "I think I better have a talk with her before she leaves the hospital."

"She won't tell you anything," Shayne said. "If she did the killing or was in on it, she won't talk. If she was in on the seance, but not the killing, she still won't talk for fear of ending up as a murder suspect. Question her, sure. She'll expect it. . .but then turn her loose and let me talk to her. She wants to talk to me anyway, and I've got a hunch I can find out more than you can."

"Wants to talk to you?" Gentry looked puzzled. Shayne explained about Yolande's whispered message.

"I can handle her, Will," Shayne said. "One thing I want to find out from her is how that knife came into the picture. Was its appearance on the table a pre-planned part of the spook show? Did she put it there or did the killer? Also I want to know how those lights were produced."

"Just remember this is police business," Gentry grunted. "A man has been killed."

"I won't interfere with your end of it," Shayne said. "I just want to take care of my client's interests, and my client is the Mann estate. Speaking of questioning, what do you expect to get out of the old man who confessed? Do you think he did it?"

"No more than you do," Gentry told his friend. "What I really want to find out is why he thinks he did."

"Well, while you talk to him, I'll go see what Madame 'Y' wants to tell me," Shayne responded.

"Yeah, yeah," Gentry said.

V

AFTER DROPPING Rourke and Lucy off at their apartments, Mike Shayne drove to Jackson Hospital.

Because Madame Yolande had plenty of money and be-

cause she was a strikingly beautiful woman, she had been taken to a private room in the County Hospital complex.

Gentry had called to clear Mike Shayne with the guard and the redhead was shown up to Yolande's room without any trouble.

When he got there the medium showed no signs of being an invalid except for a small bandage over the spot on her head where she had been struck. She was sitting up, fully clothed on the side of the bed.

When she saw Mike Shayne she said: "I'm glad you're here. You're a smoking man," Yolande smiled. "Light up and get comfortable. I want to talk to you."

There was a NO SMOKING sign on the inside of the door. Shayne looked at it.

Yolande said: "To hell with that. The price they're going to charge me for this room should entitle me to smoke a ham or barbecue a couple of pigs if I want. Just go ahead and light up. This is important and I want all your attention."

If she wanted his attention, Shayne decided she knew how to go about getting it. He pulled out a cigarette and lit it with his lighter. He looked at his "hostess".

Madame Yolande still had on the red velvet dress she'd worn at the seance, but now the neckline seemed even more low cut than before. Her beautiful and voluptuous breasts were almost bare. She had all her makeup back on including a spicy oriental perfume, and her eyes watched Shayne with a frank invitation from under heavy lids and long lashes.

"I want us to be friends," she said.

"So do I," Mike Shayne agreed. "That isn't why you asked me up here though. Is it?" He sat down in the one easy chair the hospital room held. "Why did you ask me to come here?"

Yolande put out one hand from where she sat on the bed. The beautiful, long fingers just brushed the back of his big hand. That was all—but it was at once a promise, a caress and an invitation. Shayne felt his nerves jump in spite of himself. This was a remarkably attractive woman.

"To be friends was part of it, Mike Shayne," she said. "We attract each other, and we both know it. That wasn't all, of course. One reason is we can talk freely here. They haven't had time or opportunity to bug this room yet. It may be the only privacy together we can have for a while."

Mike Shayne was surprised, but he tried not to show it.

"Who hasn't had time to bug the room?"

"The people who may have killed Philip, trying to get to me," she said to Shayne's interest.

"They? More than one? Any idea who?"

"Mr. Shayne," she said, "don't take me for an utter fool. If I knew who, I would have told your interesting friend, the Chief of Police. It was one of Philip's family, of course, who gave the order or used the knife. One of his family—but which one I do not know."

"You could guess."

Yolande shrugged.

"Guessing and proving are two different things, my big and beautiful man. Suppose I guess wrong? I am not the detective here. That's why I want to hire you to find out who did the killing. To find out right—as a detective should—so that it can be proved. I want to hire you to do that—and to protect my own life, too, while you do it."

"Your life?" Shayne asked.

She touched the bandage on her head. "This is not an accident, Mr. Shayne. The killer would have struck more surely if he could. If it was not that even in the dark I know that room. . .if I had not expected attack and moved fast to avoid it. . .if not for those things, there would be now two bodies in your City Police Morgue."

She paused. Then: "If the killer had had his way, then Philip and I would be side by side this moment but with only a marble slab for a bed."

"I'm already employed by the Mann Estate," Shayne said.

"That was to find Philip Mann or proof of his death," she said. "You did both, Mike Shayne, when you found his body on the floor. You have finished the job you were paid to do. Now work for me. It will not be so different from working for the estate as you might think. I have plenty of money. I will pay you well—both with money and with that which many men would value more."

Her voice was strong and vibrant, almost hypnotic in its effect.

She reached into the pocket of her dress and took out a key. "This will open the side door to my home. Go out there now and check the house. Wait for me there so that when your police stop questioning me I can go home knowing that the house is safe for me."

Shayne hesitated, but she pressed the key into his hand. "Go. At least do so much for me. I do not lie when I say that my life is still in great danger. When I come home, I will tell you more. Then if you refuse to

work for me, I cannot make you—but at least do this for me."

Before Shayne could speak there was a knock on the door and a hospital interne entered with two men from the Homicide Division.

"Madame Yolande," one of them said, "the doc says it's okay for you to leave now. Chief Gentry would like to see you over at Headquarters for a few minutes, and then we'll drive you home."

Mike Shayne left the room without saying anything to the detectives. He had Yolande's key in his pocket, and she knew that. He was also sure she knew that he wouldn't refuse the request she had made.

He believed that the woman really did feel her life was in danger, and under the circumstances he could do no less than make sure she found a safe house when the police brought her home.

Besides, Mike Shayne wanted to know more about just who had Yolande worried about her life. He knew she wouldn't tell Gentry. But she might tell him.

He went down the seemingly endless hall of the hospital till he found the bank of elevators and took the first one going down.

A slender, dark complected man followed him into the elevator. Shayne paid no attention to him. There were two laughing student nurses also in the cab, but they got off three flights down.

It was then that Mike Shayne felt the muzzle of a gun prod into his back just over the kidneys.

"I am going to be right behind you, Mr. Shayne," said the young man in a pronounced latino accent. "I am not going to keep poking you with this gun, but I will be right here. If you do or say anything to cause me trouble, I will break your spine with my first shot. I am a professional, Mr. Shayne. I can and I will do exactly as I say."

"I believe you," Mike Shayne said.

"That is good." the icy calm voice at his back said. "As long as you do exactly what I say and cause no trouble, there will be no need to hurt you."

VI

THE ELEVATOR went on down to the basement level of the hospital complex.

"When the door opens, you turn left," the voice at Mike Shayne's back said coldly. "At the end of the corridor is a flight of stairs. Go up and out the door into the parking lot behind this wing of the hospital. Walk straight ahead be-

tween the cars away from the hospital. Do you understand?"

"I understand," Shayne said.

"Good. When you go out the door another man will join us. He is my friend. He is waiting for us."

The elevator door opened and Mike Shayne followed the directions he had been given.

As soon as Shayne got out into the hospital parking lot, a second man fell in behind him. This gunsel could have passed for a twin of the first one. He too had a gun in his jacket pocket.

They directed the big redhead to a dark sedan in the parking lot. Shayne was told to get in the front seat. He did just that. The two appeared perfectly confident of their ability to handle him. They hadn't even bothered to take the gun he wore in his belt holster. Shayne was smart enough not to try for it. They had the drop on anything he could do and he knew that. But he hoped only for the right moment.

The man who had picked him up in the elevator got in the back seat where he could keep the detective covered.

The other one got behind the wheel. The man eased the car out of the lot onto North West 12th Ave and started to drive north. Traffic was light and he tooled the car right along.

"Where are you taking me?" Shayne asked.

"None of your damn business," the driver said. "you just do like we tell you. That's all you gotta worry about."

"Oh, come off it, Pete," the one in the back seat said. "This here Shayne's a pro. He ain't gonna make trouble. We just taking you for a talk with the boss. You tell him what the voodoo woman told you, and then we let you go."

Mike Shayne thought that over. Somebody had tailed Yolande to the hospital and watched the lobby. When Shayne went in, these men had probably phoned their boss for instructions and been told to bring the redhead in. It was significant that they knew who he was—but then a lot of characters around Miami knew Mike Shayne when they saw him.

The big man would like to have known who the boss was, but not on these fellows' terms. He wasn't sure about that "then we let you go," part either.

The car was picking up speed on the open stretch of 12th Ave south of 36th Street.

Mike Shayne said: "Sorry boys."

His big left foot kicked forward and hooked behind the driver's right leg.

He kicked the gunsel's foot off the gas pedal, then got a firm grip on the head rest behind him. At the same time he kicked his foot down hard on the car's foot brake. Rubber screamed as the brakes locked.

The driver slammed forward onto the wheel, his head striking its rim. He was out of the action.

The man in the back seat flew forward. Mike Shayne grabbed his throat and shoulder and pulled him over into the front seat where a quick rabbit punch put him sound asleep too.

Shayne had been braced for the shock. He also knew what he was doing all the time.

He yanked open the door on his side and jumped out of the car. He quickly crossed the street and hailed a south-bound cab to take him back to the hospital lot where he'd left his own car.

Shayne was pretty sure he'd see Pete and his pal again.

VII

WHEN MIKE SHAYNE got back to the big home of the medium in the southwest section of Dade County, no one was there. As a precaution he left his car around the corner from the house and cut through the back way, but as far as he could tell, the house wasn't even staked out.

The key Yolande had given him opened the back door of the house without any trouble, and the first thing the big detective did was to search the house thoroughly.

No one was there. Apparently Yolande kept no permanent servants. More than one of the bedrooms had been occupied, however. Shayne also found a man's electric razor and shaving gear in a bathroom. There was also a suitcase with some men's clothing; shirts, socks, etc., but no identification.

Whoever he was, the man wasn't in the house at the moment.

Shayne searched the seance room very carefully. There was a panel under the thick top of the table at the end where the

medium sat. Pushed back, it revealed switches, buttons and wiring. The redhead experimented just enough to discover that these controlled lighting and sound effects inside the room.

Yolande was a real pro, too. If the "spirits" didn't choose to cooperate at a seance, she was ready to stand in for them.

There were probably other special effects built into the other rooms of the house. Mike Shayne had neither the time nor the special electronic equipment it would have taken to ferret them out. He looked only for obvious bugs that might have been put in by somebody like Pete and Company, but found none.

When he was sure he was alone, Shayne used the phone in the living room to call Will Gentry at headquarters. The man at the police switchboard asked him to hold for a minute.

"I'm taking this call outside my regular office," Gentry's voice finally said. "I've got the Madame in there for questioning. Out here I can talk freely."

"What are you getting out of her?"

"Nothing," the Chief said. "Not a thing. She admits she was in the room when old Philip Mann was stabbed. That's all. Period. Outside of that, she knows nothing about anything. What did she tell you?"

"Not a thing you can use," Mike Shayne said. "Are you going to hold her?"

"How can I? She's already named her lawyers. They'd have her out of here in an hour. I'm sending her home. By the way, is Tim Rourke with you?"

"I haven't seen him since I dropped him off at his place," Shayne said. "I got the idea he was going to headquarters to see you later."

"He never showed up. By the way the old valet still says he killed his master. I finally got him to admit he's too old and feeble to have used the knife, but he says that doesn't change a thing. He killed him all the same."

"Maybe he did."

"Well, he says so. I'm holding him for his own protection as much as anything else."

"I see," Shayne said. "Can't you get anything out of him as to how he killed his master?"

"Nothing," Gentry said. "I ask him 'how?', I ask him 'why?', he just looks at me with those big sheepdog eyes of his till I wonder we don't both just sit there and weep together. All we have is a confession. No motive. No details. I think the old boy is still in shock. The doc has him under mild sedation

now, and I'll talk to him again later."

"Okay," Shayne said. "I'll keep in touch."

He hung up the phone. He hadn't told Will Gentry where he was or what he was doing there. He hadn't said a word about the two latino gunsels who tried to snatch him at the hospital.

Most particularly he hadn't mentioned the man's clothes in Yolande's guest room.

The next call Mike Shayne made was to the law firm which handled the Mann estate.

He asked for and got the attorney Harcourt who had attended the fatal seance. "I'm glad you called, Shayne," the man said.

"I'm checking in," Mike Shayne told him. "I want to know what my position is with you people now that Philip Mann is no longer missing. It seems to me I've finished the job you hired me to do. At least there isn't any more for me to do about it."

"In a way that's right," Harcourt said. "You didn't actually find Philip Mann—but he is found. We'll pay your regular fee up to today. I guess that's about it."

Shayne wasn't sure he liked that. "You sure you don't want me to investigate the killing?"

"What do you mean by that? The police are in charge of that part of the affair aren't they?"

"That's not what I mean, Mr. Harcourt. Philip Mann wasn't just found. He was murdered under circumstances which make it very likely one of his family was the killer. You represent the family. Don't you want me to try to clear them?"

"Mr. Shayne," Harcourt said, "it is perfectly unthinkable that one of the Mann family is the murderer. No—I don't think we require your services any longer. If you want to look for a killer, investigate the woman who held the seance."

"Why should she want to kill anyone?"

There was a long pause while Harcourt apparently realized he had said too much. Then: "I'm sure I don't know, Mr. Shayne. Just send us your bill, and it will be paid promptly."

"Then I'm officially off the case?"

"That is right, sir. As a matter of fact I have no choice in the matter. The order to dismiss you came directly from the family. Miss Serena spoke to me in person."

The line went dead. Mike Shayne stood there for a moment holding the silent phone in his hand. He didn't like the situation. The big man was accustomed to doing the hanging

up rather than being hung up on.

He was also surprised. Shayne hadn't been lying when he told Harcourt that the logical suspect in this case would be one of the Mann family. A smart lawyer would naturally want all the private help he could get for his clients. Harcourt knew Shayne to be the best private detective in South Florida. It simply wasn't logical for him to arbitrarily cut the big redhead out of the case.

Harcourt had to be awfully sure of himself to do that.

In Mike Shayne's experience there was only one thing that would make a good law firm so sure of themselves. They had to feel that they had inside information. They didn't need Shayne because they already knew anything he could be paid to find out for them.

Was it possible that Harcourt and Brown already knew who the killer was?

Shayne thought not. If they knew the name and had proof of guilt and the killer wasn't one of Philip Mann's heirs, Harcourt would already have notified the police.

Did they know it was one of the Mann family and want Shayne out of the way before he could prove it? Again, the big man thought not. Harcourt was no shyster but a partner in one of Miami's most reputable law firms. He wouldn't cover up a crime even if the killer was his own client.

That left only one alternative. The lawyer thought he knew who the killer was—and it wasn't one of the Mann family—but he didn't have absolute proof as yet. However, he must feel very close to proof and that the police could turn it up easily for him.

In that case he would be right in discharging a private detective who wouldn't be needed any more.

That left only one real question to be settled. Did Harcourt really have information that Mike Shayne didn't? The big man shrugged. He didn't think so.

He dropped the phone back in its cradle and went looking for a drink.

VIII

MADAME YOLANDE had the equivalent of a well stocked bar on the pantry shelves. Shayne even found a bottle of his favorite French brandy. He uncorked it and poured out a generous slug. Then he took the glass and bottle into the living room and sat down to wait for Madame Yolande to come home.

Shayne didn't have long to

wait. He was working on his second drink from the brandy bottle when an unmarked police car turned into the drive of the luxury home. He saw the medium get out and thank the driver. Then she came to the front door and let herself in with a key as the car drove off. Shayne figured the detective who brought her home would just drive a short way and then park and stake out the house. He was right as usual.

When Yolande got into the living room the first thing she saw was Mike Shayne in the easy chair toasting her with the brandy glass.

She smiled at him, but she couldn't hide the surprise that had been her first reaction.

She was smart enough to realize that she couldn't fool the big private detective.

"I wasn't sure you'd really be here," Yolande said. "I was looking out the back window of my hospital room and I saw you in the parking lot. You had escorts."

"That's right," Shayne said. "Would you like to tell me who they were?"

She said: "I don't know." And gave him the full effect of those beautiful eyes of hers. "Honestly I don't know."

"Then tell me who sent them."

She still looked straight into his eyes. "I may be able to help you there. You see, I'm being honest with you, Mike. I really am."

The big man said bluntly: "Yeah!"

It didn't phase her. Most women would have been at least embarrassed by his open suspicion—maybe even break into tears and so try to catch him off balance in turn, or show some other sign of distress.

Yolande didn't. This was a most remarkable woman indeed. She reached out and took the brandy bottle out of his hand and titlted her head back. Shayne saw three long swallows of the mellow, fiery liquor slide down her long and beautiful throat. Then she put the bottle down and wiped her mouth. She faced him eye to eye.

"I need you, Mike. I didn't lie to you in the hospital. My life is very much in danger. I think if those two men hadn't taken you out of the hospital they might have come in after me."

"You had two homicide men and an interne," Shayne said. "And now you have a guard just down the street."

"For a while. Next time, who knows? Without your help I may not live beyond tonight. Do you believe me?"

"Yes," Shayne said. "I do."

"Will you help me?"

He said: "I'm here."

"All right," she said. "Sit there while I go and change into something more practical. Then I'll tell you what I know."

She didn't ask if it was safe for her to go into the bedroom alone. He was the professional, and she trusted him to have searched the house and made it safe before she got there.

He, in turn, appreciated her confidence. Here was a woman in a thousand.

She was gone only a few minutes. When she returned she was wearing a tailored slack suit of black linen over a navy blue jersey. She wore no jewelry and her long black hair was held back by a scarf. She had a shoulder bag which swung modishly at the end of its strap.

"Come out on the patio by the pool," she said. "I don't think it's bugged, and, if it is, there's a portable radio to play to drown our voices. Bring the bottle along if you like."

When they were seated beside the pool in the warm, slanting, afternoon sunlight Shayne decided she was even more beautiful this way than in the long red gown. He could see that she sensed how he felt and that it pleased her.

"I said I'd be honest with you, Mike," she said, "and I will. First—are you still working for the Mann estate?"

"I was fired less than an hour ago," he admitted. "Mr. Harcourt doesn't think he needs me any more."

"He thinks he has his murderer," she admitted. "I know how his mind works. I've studied it long distance for long enough. He thinks he has the killer, and he's sure it's me."

"Why you?" Mike Shayne asked. "What motive would you have?"

She looked him sstraight in the eyes and her voice was level.

"He thinks it's me," she said, "because he knows something you don't. He's read Philip's Will."

IX

MIKE SHAYNE sat there in the warm sunlight and listened to her voice. She spoke quite calmly, and waited for his reaction to her statement.

"I take it you're in the Will," he stated flatly.

"Oh, yes," she said. "I'm in the Will all right, Mike Shayne. I'm in for a special bequest. A lot of it is cash and some is in securities. I'm not sure of the exact amount because of the securities."

"Make an educated guess," Shayne prompted.

"I'd say a little over three million dollars by now," Yolande said. "That should be it. Is that motive enough to kill a man, Mr. Shayne? Harcourt thinks so. How about you?"

"Motive enough for who to kill which man?" Shayne asked.

Yolande smiled. "Thank you, Mike. For some, it would be a motive to kill. For me it wasn't—particularly not to kill Philip Mann."

"Tell me about that," Shayne said.

"You searched this house before I got home," Yolande said. "I asked you to. You're a detective. You know a man has been staying here with me."

"Philip Mann," the detective said.

"Yes, Philip Mann," she acknowledged. "That should tell you, too, that it isn't the first time. Actually our association goes back to the year before Philip left his family and responsibilities and disappeared. I wasn't called Madame Yolande, then, but I knew I had psychic abilities. The mediumship—the training and study and development—came later. In Europe and South America and for one wonderful year in India. We travelled a great deal."

"You were lovers." It wasn't a question.

She smiled at him, but it was a smile of tenderness and not of amusement. "Lovers—yes. Particularly at first, despite the difference in our ages. Later on a different sort of love, more like companions, or father and daughter perhaps. We meant a great deal to each other. He helped and supported me while I learned to become what I am. No, Mike Shayne, there is not enough money in the whole world to have paid me to kill Philip Mann."

"I believe you," Shayne said. "But I don't think it's all of the truth. What are you holding back?"

Yolande smiled sadly. "Only one thing. Philip and I were married. Paris, two years ago. He had me keep it a secret. Until I got established, he said.

"Now I am established. In my own right," Yolande continued. "Philip decided that it was time to come back to America and reveal himself to his family again. He had always had them watched from long distance through an international firm in your line of business. He was—eccentric.

"Lately he did not like some of the reports that reached him. He wanted to get the reins of financial control back in his own hands. Philip was an old man and knew that his days of life were few. He said he

wanted to set his house in order while he still could."

"And that's all you have to tell?" Shayne asked.

Yolande hesitated. "Yes," she said slowly.

"I see," Shayne said. He knew there was more, but he let it pass for now. "Why did Philip want to return this way?" He waved his hand at the seance room where dark hangings still showed through the partly opened sliding glass doors. "Why all the dramatics?"

Yolande hesitated a moment before answering. "I said I was going to be frank. His reappearance as part of a seance was really a last minute improvisation on his part. He let me come back to this country ahead of him and set up my profession in this house. By pure chance his sister Serena became one of my clients. I think Philip knew she would. She believed in the spirits. I *am* a medium, Mike Shayne. Most of my sittings are not faked. Serena came to me again and again."

"And the rest of the family?"

Yolande leaned her head back and laughed. "Sheep. Though I do think George might be the rat of the pack. He's got all the qualities. Greed and financial problems. His mousey attitude is just to stay in Selena's graces. I have a hunch there's a lot of resentment there."

"Resentment," Shayne repeated. "And Alice?"

"The merry widow," Yolande stated. "Anything for a laugh. But hard as nails inside. A new husband would just be a way out of Serena's and Philip's clutches. Don't get me wrong. Philip—much as I love him—was as tight-fisted with the family as Serena was."

Mike Shayne poured himself more brandy and drank it down as he listened. "And as eccentric?"

Yolande's smile disappeared. "Yes," she said finally. "I tried to talk him out of this crazy notion. But you see, it was all long distance. From the start.

"When I wrote Philip about Serena, he wrote back of the plan in his mind. He told me he thought the shock of his sudden return under such circumstances would catch his family off guard just as his disappearance had done. It appealed to his imagination.

"I wanted him to contact his lawyers first—tell them the whole truth about his life, and about me. He said time enough for that later. He wanted to surprise them, too, so that if they had tampered with his money in any way there would be no time to cover up.

"The idea appealed to his wry

sense of humor, too. He would appear and speak as from the dead and then the lights would go on. Maybe if I could have talked to him, not relied on letters, he wouldn't have. . ."

"What about that knife that killed him?" Mike Shayne interrupted. "Who thought that up?"

"I don't know," Yolande said to the big man's surprise. "Mike, I never saw that knife before it appeared on the table. I didn't know it was coming. It was not my knife. It scared me. Then I thought it was something Philip had improvised at the last minute. Everything happened so fast. . ."

"Do you know who it belonged to" the detective asked.

"No." Yolande replied.

"How did you live abroad?" he asked. "Did someone know where Philip was and send him money from the States?"

"No," she said. "He told me he had put aside funds in Swiss numbered bank accounts—and other ways. No one knew about this but Philip. I never knew how much money it was or where. At the last I think it was running low."

"Another reason for him to make a comeback now."

"He never planned on being gone the full seven years, and. . ."

The phone inside the house began to ring. Yolande went inside to answer it.

When she came out a moment later her face was a frozen mask of fear.

"It's for you," she said to the detective. "It's the only thing I didn't tell you yet."

"And that is?"

"My ex-husband. The man who wants to kill me."

Mike Shayne got into the house fast, with Yolande at his heels, and picked up the phone.

"Shayne here."

"Mr. Shayne," a male voice said, "listen closely. I will only say this once. Then you will do as I say."

"That remains to be seen, friend," Mike Shayne said.

The voice on the other end of the line was cool and reserved, but with the tone of someone accustomed to authority. The English was perfect, but the accent was faintly latin.

"Nothing remains to be seen," the voice said. "It has all been arranged. You escaped from my men at the hospital —so this time I have put a different sort of gun to your head. This time you will not even try to evade me."

Mike Shayne said only: "It's your dime, fellow."

The other man wasn't amused. "I want you to bring the woman Yolande to me. She recognized my voice and she

knows where I can be found. Don't let her tell you any differently. She knows."

There was a pause.

Yolande was at Mike Shayne's elbow. He could tell by her face that she could either overhear the voice on the phone or already knew what it was saying.

He said: "Suppose she doesn't want to come?"

Now the other man did laugh. "Of course she won't want to come. You will bring her anyway, Shayne. I don't suppose you will want to. She is a beautiful and attractive woman—but you will. You most certainly will bring her, whether or not you want to. *That* amuses me."

"Don't laugh too hard," Shayne said. "Why will I bring her to you?"

"Because if you don't you will get a parcel in the mail." The strange voice was full of cold menace now. "In the parcel will be the head of your good friend, Tim Rourke. Just the head you understand—not the body."

Shayne said: "I don't believe you," and fought to keep all emotion out of his voice.

Another voice then came over the wire. It was Tim Rourke's.

"You can believe this joker, Mike," the voice said. "He's got me all right, and I think he's just the kind of scum would really pull a filthy trick like that."

There was a long pause while Shayne thought about that.

Then Tim Rourke spoke again. "You know me, old buddy. Who wants to live forever? You do as you think best and give my head a nice funeral if. . ."

The wire clicked dead in the middle of the sentence.

X

MIKE SHAYNE took the silent instrument from his ear and put it back in its cradle.

He looked at Yolande. "Suppose you tell me what that's about."

"That," she said, "was my ex-husband, Hernando. A long time ago when I was a girl, my parents virtually sold me to him, but he married me. After I met Philip, I got a Mexican divorce. I hadn't seen or heard of Hernando in years. He found me in Europe a year ago and followed me when I came to Miami. He had threatened to kill me more than once. Now I think he means to carry out the threat. Probably he will kill you and your friend too. Hernando likes to kill people."

"Just one of the Happiness Boys," Shayne said.

"Who?"

"You wouldn't know. Old radio comics. There were three

of them. Mannie, Moe and Whozis. Anyway that's not important. Would this Hernando have been likely to have killed Philip Mann?"

"I don't think so, Mike. It would be more his style to blackmail Philip for all he was worth. Why kill the goose that lays the golden egg every month or two? I think that is what was keeping me alive. I could be used to blackmail my rich new husband. Now that Philip is dead, there's no point in keeping me alive. Now he can kill me and ease the hurt to his pride from my running away from him so long ago."

Mike Shayne thought that over. There were still a few pieces missing from this grim and deadly puzzle. But a pattern was already beginning to form in his mind.

"I'm not going to hand you over to anyone to be killed," he said.

"Oh, yes, you are," she said suddenly. "I appreciate the thought, Mike Shayne, but I've always stood on my own feet and paid my own debts. I can't have your friend to die in my place. You take me to Hernando and perhaps he will let the two of you go."

"I've got a better idea than that," Shayne said, "and I think you're the woman to help me pull it off."

"You have a plan?" Yolande asked him.

Shayne grinned. "You bet I have a plan. I'll need you, though."

"I'm yours," Yolande smiled.

SHAYNE DROVE his own car from Yolande's home to the address she gave him. Because he had parked it over on the next street the two of them were able to go out the back way through the shrubbery and evade the man that Shayne was sure Hernando had watching the place. He was posing as a yard man and trimming the grounds of an empty house down the block.

The back way also avoided the patrol car waiting down the street.

Shayne's route took them to downtown Miami and then on up the Boulevard to the close-in North East section. On the way, he had a chance to tell Yolande what to expect and how to react when the action began.

The part of town they were headed for was in a state of transition. The original homes, some of them once genuine mansions, and the two- and three-story luxury apartment blocks were coming down and gradually being replaced by the newest type of high-rise condominiums shooting straight up in the air for fourteen stories and more.

Hernando had one of the buildings which survived from the old days. The first owner had been a wealthy bootlegger. Leter it was successively a gambling casino, a house of ill repute, an apartment house for winter tourists and a boarding house for downtown clerks.

Now it was waiting to be torn down completely and replaced by a high rise.

Just as Mike Shayne had left Yolande's by the back route he didn't drive directly up to the front entrance of the house. He parked his car in back of a store on the Boulevard, and he and the medium walked the two blocks to the address they were looking for. There were tourists and shoppers on the street, and heavy traffic passing.

Shayne was actually ringing the front doorbell before Hernando's man in the parked car spotted them. The man started to get out of the car and then settled back as he thought better of it. He couldn't put a gun in Shayne's back there without being seen.

The house had a broad front porch of the style that had been popular when it was constructed. A big bay window fronting the old living room jutted out into the porch so as

to flank the main entrance. Drapes had been drawn from the inside to blank the bay window but Shayne saw the muzzle of what was either a machine pistol or submachine gun showing between the drapes.

"Your pal Hernando packs a lot of artillery," Shayne said to Yolande as he rang the doorbell.

She said nothing. Her hand kept a firm grip on the big leather bag which swung from her right shoulder by its strap.

The front door opened and a man looked out at them. He was one of the two young gunsels who had tried to kidnap Mike Shayne earlier. His head was heavily bandaged.

"Bring her in," he said bitterly.

"Not a chance, buster," Mike Shayne told him.

That shook the young gunsel. "What's a'matter with you? You was told to bring her here. Now come on in the both of you."

"Sorry, sonny," Shayne said. "That's not the way it's going to be. First you bring Tim Rourke to the front door here. Then we make the trade. He steps out and she goes in. That's the only way I'll do it."

"Don't you trust the boss?"

Shayne didn't bother to answer.

"We got guns on you right now," the man said nervously. "You better. . ."

"Get your boss," Shayne said.

The young gunsel closed the door.

There was a long pause. Shayne sensed that other armed men were being brought to the windows and the front of the house. Hernando had no intention of letting Shayne walk away with Rourke, of course. Once Yolande was inside the house there'd be a couple of quick shots from inside, probably from a silencer-equipped gun. It would only take seconds to pull the bodies into the hallway.

Chances were none of the passers by in the street would notice a thing. Hernando would have been smart enough to figure all that out.

Mike Shayne admired the way Yolande was doing her part. Her face was white and set. She was under terrible strain but managed to look frightened. She was a step ahead of Shayne and to his left as he'd told her to be.

They heard footsteps in the hallway.

The door opened wide so that the afternoon sunlight flooded the big hallway and the people standing there.

Tim Rourke was in front. His hands weren't tied, but by the

way he rubbed his wrists, Shayne knew they had been.

Rourke looked at his big friend. "You shouldn't have done it, maestro," he said. "I'm not worth it."

That was to distract attention and both of them knew it. Rourke was ready and waiting for Mike Shayne to make his move.

The two young gunsels stood one on each side of Rourke, each with a pistol in hand. There was also another armed man standing partly in the hallway in the arch leading out from the living room. This one had a sawed off pump shotgun.

The one that captured Mike Shayne's eye, though, was a big, dark eyed man in a white linen suit who stood close to the trio in the doorway. This one had to be Hernando. He was strikingly handsome, dark-eyed, broad shouldered with raven hair that had just begun to show a dust of grey.

He said: "All right, Mr. Shayne. I've kept my part of the bargain. Now give me my woman."

"Why certainly," Shayne said. "I told you I'd deliver her and I have."

Then he did the one thing in the world that the tall, commanding latino hadn't expected. It was the single thing that Hernando had a right not to expect, because nobody else but Mike Shayne would have tried it.

The big, red headed detective attacked.

XI

MIKE SHAYNE reached across behind Yolande's back and caught her left elbow with his left hand and pushed her forward into the hall. She held back a little as if struggling and called out: "No. . .no!" but actually she was expecting the move.

Under cover of the distraction she made, Shayne used his right hand to pull the big Colt's forty-five automatic pistol he had stuffed into the front waistband of his trousers under the jacket.

Tim Rourke didn't step out the door as everyone expected. Instead he spun to his left, got the gun wrist of the gunsel on that side in his hands, applied judo pressure and got ahold of the gun. That took care of the man on Shayne's right.

At the same instant Yolande pulled the .38 special revolver Shayne had given her out of the shoulder bag she carried and slammed the barrel down on the wrist of the other gunsel. Bone snapped audibly and his gun thudded on the floor.

Shayne was into the hallway

and kicked the door shut behind him. That neutralized the man in the car and the one in the bay window.

The big detective slammed his gun muzzle into Hernando's belly just above the fancy gold and diamond belt buckle. The man in the white suit staggered as most of the breath was driven out of his body by the blow.

Before he could recover and shout orders to his men, Mike Shayne anticipated his move.

"Everybody freeze," the redhead yelled in a voice that could be heard on all three floors of the old mansion. "If anybody moves or even sneezes, I'll pull the trigger."

He waited a moment but heard nothing.

"Drop your guns," he yelled then. "I want to hear them hit the floor and bounce. Now."

Shayne got away with it by his sheer audacity. The man half in the hall with the shotgun had no choice, of course. He was already under the guns held by Yolande and Tim Rourke. He opened his fingers and let his weapon fall.

The man in the bay window with the scatter gun could have been a real danger, though. In his place, Mike Shayne would have kicked out the glass of the window, jumped through to the porch, spun around and sprayed slugs through the front door glass into the hall. He might have hit one or more of his friends too of course, but he surely would have gotten Shayne, Rourke and the woman.

For a second Mike Shayne wondered if the man would have the guts to try. Then he heard that gun, too, hit the floor.

Shayne's face was only inches from Hernando's and the expression in the big Latin's eyes was that of a rattler coiled to strike.

"Forget it, friend," Shayne said. "Your game is spoiled. From now on I call the tune."

Hernando spat in his face from ten inches away.

A lesser man than Mike Shayne would have pulled the trigger, if only by sheer reflex action. Shayne held himself in the grip of a steely self control, his face unflinching.

"That was stupid, my friend," he said. "I didn't come here to kill you, and I won't unless you make me. Now we're going right on back down the hall. When we get there, you're going to turn around and walk out the door ahead of us. If you or anyone else makes a false move, I'll break your backbone with the first shot. You can bank on that."

"I might as well die here,"

Hernando said. "Then you go with me."

"Nobody has to die," Shayne said. "Nobody will unless you force me. When we're clear of this place I'll ask you some questions and then turn you loose."

Hernando seemed to believe the big detective. He called out in a loud voice: "All you men stay where you are. Don't try anything or this man will kill me. Believe that."

Then he spoke several sentences in a Spanish dialect so fast and idiomatic that Shayne couldn't follow.

"He just repeated the same thing," Yolande said.

Shayne, Rourke and Yolande moved rapidly down the long hall. Rourke and the woman went first. Then Hernando with Shayne's gun in his back, and finally the big redhead himself.

They got through the house and out into the yard. There was an alley behind the house and a driveway that went through to the next street.

Shayne saw faces at the windows of the house they had left, but no one shot at them. Obviously they wanted to keep their leader alive.

They almost made it out of the yard.

Almost.

Hernando pulled a trick Mike Shayne himself had used in the past, and should have been prepared for.

In mid step, Hernando swung his right foot back instead of forward and stamped the stiff leather heel of his shoe down on the toes of Shayne's right foot.

If he had hit the instep instead of the toes he'd have broken the detective's foot. As it was, a stab of pain shot through Shayne.

He yelled and gave an involuntary twist.

It was just enough for Hernando to pull free and leap off to the side and clear of the forty-five. At the same moment, he flexed his right arm and a beautifully engraved little double-barrelled deringer dropped out of his sleeve into his hand, and seemed to point itself at the detective.

Shayne and Yolande fired together.

Shayne aimed at Hernando's gun hand.

Yolande fired for the heart. She wasn't used to the kick of the .38 and the slug went high. It broke Hernando's left shoulder and twisted him around. He fell down.

Shots were fired from the house.

Mike Shayne and his friends bolted for the shelter of the alleyway.

Mike Shayne and the others

swiftly moved around the corner of a group of detached utility buildings that backed up to the alley.

Hearing no sound of pursuing footsteps, they slowed to a fast walk. Yolande nervously glanced over her shoulder. "Relax, Yolande," Shayne told her. "Hernando's boys are probably too busy taking their wounded leader back in to chase us."

"What in the blazing hades was it all about?" Tim Rourke demanded. "That goon just snatched me off the street. He never explained anything."

"Put your guns up," Shayne said. "We'll go through to the street and get my car."

"Aren't we going to go back and finish him?" Yolande demanded. "He was trying to kill me."

Shayne wondered. Yolande had tried to kill Hernando but Hernando's gun had been aimed at Mike Shayne, not at her.

"There's too many guns back there," he said. "Let them take care of him."

"What shall we do?"

"You don't live far from here," Shayne said to Tim Rourke. "I'll drop you off and you and Yolande stay at your place. I'll call you in a little while and tell you what to do next. If I'm lucky I think I can get this whole mess cleaned up by tonight."

By that time they could hear police car sirens approaching the building they had left only moments before.

"I figured one of the neighbors would phone in about those shots," Shayne grinned. "That will keep brother Hernando and his goons out of our hair for a while. Not let's get going, you two. I've got things to do."

XII

THE FIRST PLACE Mike Shayne drove was to police headquarters to see his friend Will Gentry. The Chief was waiting in his big, oak panelled office on the second floor.

"I thought I told you to stay out of my hair, Mike," were his first words.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Shayne said with a broad grin.

Gentry took a half empty bottle of brandy out of his desk and passed it and a glass over to the big detective. "I'm talking about that clutch of south-of-the-border commandos my boys scooped in over on the northeast side," he said. "I don't suppose you know anything about that?"

"Why should I?" Shayne parried.

"Because one of the neighbors saw three people run out the back way with guns. The description isn't too good, but it just might have been you and Rourke and that lady spook doctor you sneaked out of her house and out from under my man's nose."

"Believe me," Shayne said, "If I knew what you wanted to find out, you'd be the first to hear it from me."

"I don't suppose this has anything to do with the Mann case," Gentry growled.

"No, I honestly don't think it does," Shayne replied. "Just a jealous boyfriend. At the most only a side effect. Maybe later I can tell you more. But that's all I know now."

Gentry snorted. "That could mean anything or nothing, couldn't it? Well don't get too big for your britches this time, Mike. The lawyer, Harcourt, is over in the courthouse right now swearing out a warrant for your girl friend for the murder of his client, Philip Mann. What do you make of that, Mike?"

Shayne thought for a moment, tugging the lobe of his left ear with a big thumb and forefinger.

"I think I like it well enough to give the tree another shake," he said finally. "Can you have the old valet brought up here for a few minutes? I think I can clear up his part in this."

Gentry pushed a button on his desk and gave an order to the man who answered.

Five minutes later the long-time Mann servant was seated across the desk from Shayne and the Chief. He had a determined expression on his old face.

"You're not going to break me down," Peter said calmly. "I killed Mr. Philip, and nobody's going to make me deny it."

"I'm not trying to get you to deny anything, Peter," Mike Shayne said in as cordial a tone as he could muster. "All I want to do is ask you a few friendly questions to clear up some details for us."

"Oh."

"First of all—did the murder weapon the big knife, belong to you?"

"No. Not to me. It was a family knife. Part of a collection Mr. Philip made as a young man. After he went away it was left in his study locked up with his other things. I used to see it there when I cleaned the room."

Shayne could see by the Chief's expression that this was news to him.

"And who had access to it?"

The old man looked thoughtful. "Well, Miss Serena, of course. And Mr. George. Mr.

George takes care of Mr. Philip's collections. Miss Serena calls them heathen."

"And yourself?"

"Pardon?"

"You had access. . ."

"Oh. Yes." the old man looked at the floor.

"Did you take the knife to the seance, Peter?"

"Oh, no, sir! I wouldn't have moved any of Mr. Philip's personal things. I recognized it at once, though, in that awful light. That's when I should have yelled out and made them turn on the regular lights. I was too slow. I'm old."

"Did you use the knife on Mr. Philip yourself?" Mike Shayne asked.

"Oh, no, sir. I just should have stopped it then."

Shayne changed the subject. "You used to write Mr. Philip about doings in the family while he was gone, didn't you?"

"Why, yes, sir. I was the one kept him posted. How did you know?"

"Never mind that part," Shayne said. "Did he write you and let you know where he was?"

"No," the old man said, "I just wrote to a Swiss bank like he had told me. They gave him the letters. That was all. That way I couldn't let slip where he was to anybody else in the family."

"Somebody else found out, though," Shayne said. "Just recently somebody found out."

The servant looked stricken.

"Didn't Mr. Philip write you that he was coming home soon?" Shayne asked.

The old man nodded.

"Did he tell you about his plan for the seance?" Shayne asked. "Did he do that so you wouldn't be shocked and frightened when you saw his face?"

"Oh, yes, sir," old Peter blurted out. "He told me not to tell anyone in the family because he would be in danger. I failed him, sir. I failed him and so he was killed. You do see, sir, why I say I killed him? You do, don't you?"

"I see," the big detective said gently. "Only one more thing, Peter. How did you fail him? Who found out, and how?"

"I don't know who," Peter said. "I honestly don't know who. It was my fault. Mr. Philip told me to always burn his letters, but I was so excited I didn't burn this one. I left it on my dresser and later on I missed it. I was confused then. I thought maybe I had missed it. . .but when I saw the knife on the table I knew someone had found it. So you see. . .my carelessness killed him. I did. . ." His voice trailed off.

Shayne and the Chief looked at each other.

"You have no idea who found the letter?" the detective asked.

"No, sir. Anyone in the family could have come into my room and found it."

Five minutes later Shayne and the Chief were again alone in the big office. Old Peter had been taken back to his cell for safe keeping.

"I don't think the old boy knows it," Shayne was saying, "but he probably saved his own life when his conscience made him confess to you. It got him into a nice safe cell where the killer couldn't get at him to shut him up."

"This may change everything," Chief Gentry said. "Now what do I do when the State's Attorney sends over a warrant for me to arrest that Yolande woman?"

"Just sit on your hands for a few hours," Shayne said. "Then call the Harcourt office and the Mann family. You tell them the woman is hid out someplace. You can't find her, but she contacted you through me. She will turn herself in—but only at her house and only if everybody who was at the seance this morning is there. She wants to make a statement to them all. If they want to assume it's a confession, don't say anything different."

"This is another of your grandstand plays," Gentry said. "Confound it, Mike, why can't you let the police do it the right way just for once on one of your cases?"

"Because if I did, this case would go in the unsolved file for the rest of our lives," Shayne said, and poured himself a good stiff slug of brandy. He tossed it down and got some water from the cooler against the wall for a chaser.

"Be reasonable, Mike," the Chief said.

"I am being reasonable," Shayne said. "I know who killed old Philip Mann, but I can't prove it unless I can make the killer show his hand. This is the way to do it. Set up the meet for tonight at Yolande's

like I said, if you have to pick up the family and take them down there in squad cars. Stake out the place with as many cops as you like. I'll give you your killer on a silver platter."

"Keep your silver platter," Gentry said. "Steel handcuffs will do me just fine."

XIII

WHEN MIKE SHAYNE, Madame Yolande and Tim Rourke drove up to the medium's luxurious home at ten o'clock that night, all the people who had attended the morning seance were already there. Even Yolande's two patrons, Mrs. Wills and Mrs. Carder, were there by special invitation—which excitement and curiosity made them accept.

Chief Will Gentry and two of his men were also there—apparently escorting Old Peter. There were other detectives and uniformed police watching the house from the outside.

The whole company kept their eyes on Madame Yolande as she entered the room. It was obvious that the Mann family looked on her as a suspect—and equally that her two patrons were ready to fly to her aid.

"We'll all go into the seance room," Shayne announced, "and sit in the same chairs we did this morning. We'll have one of Chief Gentry's men pull the blinds and drapes, but we'll leave the lights on. Chief Gentry will stand by the switch to make sure they stay on. Now, places everybody."

"What's all this about?" Mr. Harcourt demanded. "I thought we were here to listen to a statement from this woman before her arrest—and that was all."

"Not quite all," Shayne said. "We're here to listen to the confession of the real murderer, but I'm not saying yet who that is. The family of Philip Mann are all here. His brother and sister George and Serena; his daughter-in-law Alice and his grandchildren Peter and Sue. It's fitting, too, that his faithful servant and friend Old Peter is also here." Shayne paused.

"That calls the roll very nicely," Harcourt's partner, Brown, said.

"Not quite," Mike Shayne said. When they all looked at him in puzzlement he continued. "Of course there's also the dead man's widow."

"His widow!" That was young Peter Mann.

"Of course," Mike Shayne said. "as some of you already know. His widow—Mrs. Yolande Mann."

Yolande said gravely from her place at the head of the table: "Philip Mann and I were married in Paris two years ago. It was all quite legal I assure you."

"So that's why she killed Philip," George Mann said. "We heard today she was in the Will. But this. . ."

"This proves she didn't kill him," Shayne said. "As his wife she had everything to gain by keeping him alive. Besides she said she loved him, and I believe her.

"However—once someone in Philip's family learned that she was married to him, that someone had a multi-million dollar motive for killing them both. Now, money isn't the only motive for murder. Power is a strong motive. Jealousy. Freedom. Any of these motives could apply to one or all of Philip Mann's family. Remember that.

"Now when someone stole a letter Philip had mailed to his servant and learned the details of Philip's plan for the seance. . .motive was joined to opportunity. The rest is murder."

"How was it done?" George Mann asked.

"Easily," Shayne said. "The murderer brought the big old knife from the Mann house concealed on his person. He or she had already given it a quick coat of luminous paint such as magicians and some mediums use for stage effects. The knife would 'appear' when it was slid out onto the table.

"When Philip Mann entered on schedule through the concealed door back of the drapes, his face was illumined by a hidden light just as he expected. Yolande has explained to me how that is done. All the killer had to do under cover of the confusion and screaming was pick up the knife and stab old Philip to death. We were all excited and moving about anyway.

"Then the murderer tried for a second killing. He knew Yolande would make for the hidden door near the medium's cabinet, so he waited for her there. The knife was in Philip's body. This time the weapon was a club or blackjack. In the dark, the blow missed full effect. Yolande wasn't killed.

"Later, when it seemed Yolande could be blamed for Philip's death, that didn't seem too important. Also there was a chance Hernando would kill or discredit her. He was secretly tipped by the killer to come to Miami, I'm sure."

"You keep saying 'the killer'" George Mann said then. "You say it was one of the family. I'm sure it wasn't

me, so whom do you accuse."

"The answer to that is easy enough to see," Shayne said. "Remember, the killer had to be able to bring that big dagger—it's over sixteen inches long—into this room without our seeing it. The killer also had to be thoroughly familiar with the seance procedure, and the location of the hidden door. Only one person in this room fits those specifications."

"Who," George Mann demanded.

"The one person who had more than money to gain. The one person to whom Philip Mann's death would bring financial and personal satisfaction.

"Serena Mann."

All eyes turned to where the dead man's sister sat.

"That's right," Shayne continued. "Serena Mann had her brother traced years ago. She knew about Yolande and the marriage. She stole the letter Philip wrote to Peter, and learned about his plans for that dramatic reappearance. She already knew that he was in this country.

"She also knew something else. Something no one else in the family knew. She knew he was married. When Philip Mann disappeared, Serena, by all accounts, became a different woman. What had been a mild religious turn, became an obsession. She was always afraid that someone would lead her brother astray—in her understanding of the word.

"When she learned of his marriage to Yolande, and knew that he was living with her abroad, she decided. . ."

"It was sinful," Serena said quietly, her mouth pursed tightly. "The whole situation was sinful. Philip should never have left me. He had no right. His. . .his harlot had no right to his money." She smiled her strange smile again. "I brought the knife in. I hid it in my dress. I killed Philip. I meant to kill his. . .Jezebel. But I failed. It's God's will."

She looked down at her hands in her lap.

George Mann started to say something, but then lapsed into silence. For a moment no one spoke.

"Miss Serena Mann," Will Gentry began, "I must inform you that you have the right to remain silent. . ."

THE ONLY MAGAZINE featuring MIKE SHAYNE every issue!

The small business Dr. Drexyll established was a great success; all profit and not a cent of cost. Then an old and wealthy woman asked him to tea . . .

THE DREXYLL PLOY

A Novelet You Won't Easily Forget

by ROBERT ALAN BLAIR

AT A SMALL writing desk on the mezzanine of the Hotel International in Capetown sat a man in black, watching with boredom the desultory afternoon traffic humming past on the rainy street. He was lean and craggy, with bushy brows, his graying black hair brushed back long. His severe suit was black; his cravat was black; his soft hat was black.

Suddenly he stiffened, and grasped the edge of the desk so violently that the hat at his elbow fell unnoticed to the carpeting. "Cor, it's Millie!" he said in a nasal voice unsuited to his clerical appearance.

Although he had only a glimpse of the woman as she hurried from the taxicab beneath the hotel canopy, he knew he was not mistaken. The prim dress, the ridiculous hat, the waddling little walk. After so many years, surely her being here was mere coincidence?

Not until he was in the taxicab on the way to the airport did he dare to relax. In a small black notebook he drew a firm line beneath the final entry under the heading "Capetown, S.A." and wrote a new heading: "Matanzas Bay, California".

Geographically, Matanzas Bay is a small indentation in the coastline between Los Angeles and San Francisco. Physically, it is a village clinging to the steep wooded hillsides encircling the bay, crowded close against the sea

by the dark heights of the Coast Range.

Stubbornly individualistic, it holds jealously to a last-century old-world nostalgia called picturesque by the visitor, called certain profane terms by the house painter and the maintenance man.

David Drexyll arrived by bus in the lingering daylight of a summer evening. He went at

once to the public telephones and looked up a listing. He dialed, and Lucille Charters answered after only one ring, bringing to his mind the vision of a lonely widow, at the beginning of another long evening, sitting within reach of the telephone.

"Please forgive this intrusion," he opened. "I am Dr. Drexyll. Mrs. Hunter referred me to you." The garrulous Mrs. Hunter's tiresome monologues about Matanzas Bay had been of some value.

Lucille's voice brightened. "Marge Hunter? Wherever did you meet her?"

"Her tour passed through Capetown last month. Is it true that you accept lodgers upon occasion?"

"Why—I do have guest quarters, but really, I've been out of the boarding business for some years." A pause. "*Dr.* Drexyll, you say?"

"Doctor of Divinity, Madam. Retired. If you cannot accommodate me, perhaps you will recommend an inn?"

"Please come," she said quickly. "I'll expect you."

The old house capitavated Drexyll the instant he emerged from the taxicab. Set on the upper portion of a sloping lot among giant sycamores, it commanded a tree-framed view of the bay

The door was opened by a slim gray woman whose fragile ethereal beauty spoke gently though sadly of what it had been. "Do come in," Lucille Charters said. She led him up the long stairs to a small pleasant front room. "This used to be my daughter's room," she explained. "She's living in Seattle now."

"So Mrs. Hunter told me." He looked around the room, then back at her, smiling. "If the hostess is willing, the guest is even more so."

Drexyll paid four weeks' board in advance.

In the morning, after an early and amiable breakfast at his landlady's table, Drexyll ventured out for his first comprehensive look at Matanzas Bay. Lucille offered to drive him in her old sedan, but he preferred wandering leisurely and alone. He was prepared to spend as much time as necessary to familiarize himself with the pulse of the village. His pace depended on the ease with which people permitted themselves to be met.

At the corner lot adjoining the Charters property, he stopped before the Community Church, an inviting rustic lodge partially hidden in a stand of live-oaks. Its identifying sign, a small shield hanging from a wrought-iron brac-

ket, announced that Dr. Francis Pace was rector. Drexyll made the appropriate entry in his black book.

The church door opened, and a young man in t-shirt and baggy fatigue trousers backed out, dragging a long stepladder. He was muscular and tanned, and had not shaved this morning.

"Off to an early start?" asked Drexyll.

"Morning's my only time left for the odd jobs. The duties of the rector are many and varied."

Drexyll came near to shake hands. "I, sir, am Dr. Drexyll, Mrs. Charters' new lodger."

"A clergyman too?" asked Pace with growing interest.

"Retired by ill health." Drexyll looked the younger man up and down. "The cloth has assumed new meaning since my day."

"As you see, I'm a devotee of the casual approach. My first mistake was telling the Board I was handy with tools. They couldn't overlook the economy. They're curious to see what I try next. But they can't argue with a church attendance that hasn't stopped growing since I came."

"But surely there is at least one Board member conservatively shocked by your ideas?"

"The chairman, no less—but she's the biggest single factor in my survival." Pace winked. "She's my aunt."

"Ah? And she wields enough influence to override the objections of the others?"

"Influence, Doctor, spelled MONEY."

Drexyll took out his black book. "I must meet this aunt of yours. What is her name?"

"Emily Hansen—but not a chance. She lives in a castle several miles up the coast road, almost never comes to town, and won't have a phone on the place. Go without an invitation, and she refuses to see you. If she wants you to come, she sends her old manservant Nathan with a summons."

Drexyll wrote the name. "Then I shall have to negotiate a summons."

After a week of strolling, chatting, dropping into shops, and a Sunday morning at the Community Church with Lucille, suddenly it was "Good morning, Dr. Drexyll" on the street, and "Hello there, Dr. Drexyll" from an open shop door. An occasional innocuous question was followed by an entry in his black book.

By the end of his third week in town, Drexyll's preliminaries were completed.

"But how come you want to go in business, Rev?" asked Herbert Salomon, owner of the

White Sands Villa, one of the larger resorts on Hotel Row. Drexyll had called upon him at his office overlooking the formal gardens and beach. "The sharpies are just laying for your kind."

"Necessity. Mr. Salomon. The ministry is an edifying career, but exhausting. A touch of the fever did for me in the tropics, and now I see myself in the guise of a small shopkeeper, as were my father and grandfather. Not to abandon the ministry entirely, you understand. My mission in life is to reveal a truth which should be both simple and obvious: that all worship the same God."

Salomon removed the cigar from his mouth and sat forward in his swivel chair. "But it would be a crime to put a man like you behind a counter."

Drexyll shook his head. "I am not an evangelist. I expect no income from such a mission. Therefore I must build financial independence beforehand."

The cigar resumed its rightful place. "Well, if it's cash you need, I'd even put up some myself, just to see you on the road."

"No. I accept no donations. If I am to be a business man, I shall conduct myself as a business man."

Salomon slapped his desk. "Okay, call it a business loan. The sooner you're established, the sooner you'll show a profit, and the sooner you'll forget about business and do what you were meant to be doing. What type business? You can't count on volume except from tourists, so your merchandise has to be more or less luxury."

Drexyll stood up to look out to sea. "As a lad I was apprenticed to a bookbinder. I visualize a second-hand bookstall, offering rare and out-of-print volumes, first editions forgotten through several inheritances."

Salomon smiled his slow appreciation. "Yeah. Tourists go for that. They may never go near a bookshop at home, but here it's quaint. How much would you think you'll need for a starter?"

Drexyll turned back from the window. "Really, Mr. Salomon. I am not destitute. I prefer to start in my own small way."

"Start small, and you'll stay small." Salomon produced a checkbook. "Say I put up a couple of grand."

"I shall be forever grateful. But I insist that it be a proper business loan, repayable with customary interest."

Salomon chuckled as he wrote the check. "If that's the way you want it—but I'd get a better tax writeoff on a religious contribution."

Within two months after his

arrival in Matanzas Bay, David Drexyll opened *The Bookstall, D. Drexyll Prop.* in a narrow arcade half a block off the main street. He departed immediately for a week's buying trip, and soon heavy parcels began coming for him in care of Lucille Charters. She stacked them unopened in the hall at the foot of the stairs.

For another week he worked day and night at the shop, preparing his initial merchandise. He took work to a nearby printer: notes transcribed verbatim from pages that he intended to replace.

From its moment of opening, The Bookstall prospered phenomenally. At the end of his first month's business, Drexyll invited Lucille out to dinner.

"A celebration, dear lady!" he said, seizing both her hands. "Ending the month with a small profit demands it."

The restaurant was shadowy and candlelit, peopled by the drifting forms of thin old men in tuxedos and large white aprons. Cocktails, white wine with a turbot almondine, B&B after coffee.

Drexyll held the small glass beneath his nose, inhaled the brandy aroma with his eyes closed. "Once past the half-century mark, one's mind slips easily into the familiar patterns of youth: momentary enthusiasm plunging into momentary despair. Stability fades with virility, until one's interests are as transient as a toddler's, his dreams as fanciful, his hopes as vain. Age is not a curse, but a reward for doing one's best."

Years of inhibition paralyzed Lucille's tongue at a moment when reason was not its sole director. "David—would you be speaking personally?"

He reached across the table and took her hand. "Never more personally, my dear."

"I'd thought it was too late. Now I don't know *what* to believe."

"Believe everything! I hesitate to say 'love'. I loved once, when the fires burned hotter. But mine was no existence for a woman—especially not Mildred. She was a frail creature, meant to be treasured in a chateau in the south country, where her people lived. Not in Calcutta. She had absolutely no resistance to the fever, you know." He shrugged, eyes focused beyond the present. "She was twenty-four," he concluded.

"I'm so sorry," said Lucile simply.

"Don't be. The past is gone. It has exacted its full toll. One must not destroy the balance of his life for a moment's loss."

She nodded. "I know you're speaking for me as well as yourself. My years of hoping and dreaming came long ago, and passed over. I've had no dreams since Ellen's father went away. It's been almost a compulsion for me to disillusion Ellen. David, I've so many years to make up for!"

"Then let us begin—tonight."

Lucille Charters and David Drexyll were married the Friday of Thanksgiving week, at a small informal service in the Community Church. Ellen Charters had come down from Seattle for both the holiday and the ceremony, and after lunch at the house next door, she looked after the house while the Drexylls drove to Palm Springs for a week's honeymoon. Drexyll would neglect The Bookstall for only that long.

Upon their return, routine resumed with minor exceptions: Drexyll moved into the master bedroom, and removed "in care of Lucille Charters" from his listing at the post office.

The Monday following, he was off on another buying trip. He discouraged Lucille from accompanying him. "These trips would be crashing bores for you. There is much night work, and I permit myself little leisure."

"Then I could keep the shop open."

"No, my dear. A few days lost do not hurt business. The day that The Bookstall becomes more than a one-man enterprise, it shall cease to be enjoyable to me. That is the day I shall sell out—and we may then embark on my mission."

Lucille let her imagination soar. "A world tour. Places I'd never hoped to see! Oh, David, sometimes in the night I wake up, and I think this can't be happening to me. But I look

over, and there you are. Are you sure we did the right thing? That we weren't just being foolish?"

"Eminently right, and never foolish."

Lucille was satisfied. Satisfied, and proud of her new husband, whose little business flourished.

And David Drexyll was satisfied.

A regular visitor at The Bookstall was old Nathan, gaunt white-topped manservant from Emily Hansen's castle. He came mostly to browse, but his purchases revealed rare erudition that became more evident with every conversation. David Drexyll watched with pleasure for the battered pickup truck that the old man drove on Emily's errands.

"A new acquisition I've set aside for you, Nathan," Drexyll told him, taking from beneath the counter a book lovingly rebound in soft brown leather with gold lettering. "A rare Browning."

With gentle educated fingers the old man turned the pages. "It must've been just about gone—you had to replace so much of it."

"Criminal neglect, Nathan! Forgotten in the garret of a family who had no intimation of its worth."

"This newness spoils the thrill. I'd like to see them as you find them."

"Crumbling to the touch? Mildew eating at the very text? When I sell them, they are safely put to their original use."

Nathan set the book on the counter. "I want it. Real reason I came today, though, the Missus wants to see you."

Drexyll barely paused in making out the sales slip. "Oh? When?"

"I'm supposed to fetch you back, if you can come."

"From what I understand of Mrs. Hansen," said Drexyll, "the summons is best not ignored."

The castle of Emily Hansen was set high on a promontory above the breakers, concealed from the coast highway by thick pine forest. Nathan's truck rounded the final turn of the twisting drive, opening to them through the trees a vision of the castle, based on rock, with open sea and clear afternoon sky beyond.

Nathan pushed through the double oaken panels hung in a deep stone archway, conducting Drexyll into a long gloomy entrance hall rich in draperies and carpeting but quite bare of furniture.

"She's in there," said Nathan, indicating a closed door to their right. His voice was snatched

up by the emptiness of the hall, and fluttered in hidden corners, suggesting unseen watchers snickering at the two men dwarfed by the material magnificence about them.

Nathan knocked. "I brought him, Ma'am."

The door swung back. Emily Hansen was tall and lean and straight and commanding. She carried a cane whose chief purpose seemed to be an expression of her authority. Her face was a tracery of fine lines which had not assumed the vulgarity of wrinkes.

"Good, you came." She waved Drexyll inside. "You know who I am, I know who you are. Don't waste time being polite."

It was a little redwood-paneled study. She waved him to a chair beside a table where waited a decanter of sherry and a single glass. From a cabinet she took an extra glass, filled it.

"I thought I'd have to kill this sherry by myself, but you don't look like a man to turn down a drink."

"You are a discerning woman."

"Why did you want to see me?"

Drexyll's eyes widened slightly. "I was under the impression it was the other way around."

"Everybody wants to see me—but it isn't everybody *I* want to see." Emily Hansen studied him over the rim of her glass. "You'd better live up to what I've heard about you."

"If I have expressed a wish to see you, it was my curiosity seeking the source of the legend. They do present you as rather an ogre."

Emily laughed. "Sonny, it's a treat to meet somebody not dripping honey because I'm the richest old hag in Matanzas Bay. Still I know my money's on your mind. If I had none, nobody'd ever come near. They make me sick with their good causes. They bow and they scrape, but they're thinking, old pinchpenny Hansen ought to be good for plenty. Now are you ready to tell me why you came, or have I scared you off?"

He shrugged. "I fear the only good cause my imagination can produce at the moment is the care and maintenance of David Drexyll. You are too canny a person to accept another."

"At last!" she crowed. "A really honest and sincere selfish man!"

"Selfishness is a virtue if undisguised."

Emily drained her glass, set it down with finality. "Suppose I don't know you've been busy talking local citizens out of their hard-earned cash?"

Drexyll's poise was shaken

only briefly; he managed a smile. "To good effect, Madam. The Bookstall prospers; their confidence is justified."

"And I'm on your sucker list too."

"Madam?"

"Putting it in your terms: you'd like to cultivate me for funds, because you know I do a little speculative investing."

"True," he said smoothly. "I anticipated your interest."

"You anticipated right. You seem to have a going shop there. Get yourself an accountant and have a year's-end statement drawn up. I'll want a copy, to help me decide whether I'll bet a winning horse." Emily Hansen stood up. "That's all. You may go now."

Nathan was waiting beside the truck to take Drexyll back to town.

FRANK PACE was one of the very few to see the tiny news story buried in the back pages of the Matanzas Bay *Citizen*. From a city in the southern end of the Central Valley, the item bore the Headlines:

Phantom Bookworm in Return Visit. The theft of two volumes of a rare Browning collection from the public library had not been discovered until annual inventory. An earlier theft had occurred in August. Similar book thefts have been reported from other California cities.

Pace drove at once to Emily Hansen's castle. He strode through the long hall and pushed into the great echoing kitchen, where Emily, still in robe and slippers, her white hair straggling about her shoulders, was having a second cup of coffee over the morning paper.

She saw the paper in his hand. "Don't say a word. I saw it too." She got another cup for him.

Pace drew a chair to the table. "Do you think it's Drexyll?"

"I know it is." Emily opened the outer door. "Nathan," she called. She returned to sit again. "And if you expect me to drop my teeth, I won't. The story fits the man."

"But where's the proof?"

Nathan closed the kitchen door softly behind him, nodded to Pace. Emily asked him, "I want to see that last book you bought at The Boostall—the Browning."

"Browning?" exploded Pace.

"Yes," said Emily.

Nathan was back in a moment with the book. Emily directed him with a gesture to hand it to Frank, who turned it over and over, opened it at several places. He said at last. "It's hard to imagine."

"You'll see it's been rebound," said Emily. "New flyleaves, quite a few new pages—probably replacing those that had the library imprint. So now we know his racket. I've had Judge Buchanan digging up his background for me, and it's turning into quite a story."

"What now? Turn this over to the police?"

"Not yet. I'm curious to see exactly where he's heading. As long as he doesn't suspect that anyone knows, he'll have no reason to bolt. I want the full report from Buchanan before I act."

"I wonder if Mrs. Drexyll knows."

"Not unless she caught this in the paper—and neither of you is going to tell her. Frank, watch what happens next door for a while. And save any more of these stories you see in the paper. When the time comes, we'll compare notes."

In mid-December a polite well-dressed young man came to the door of the Charters-Drexyll residence. "Is it Mrs. Charters?" he asked Lucille.

"No," she said, smiling. "It's Mrs. Drexyll now."

He frowned in sudden perplexity. "Well—is Mr. Drexyll in?"

"My husband is out of town on business, and I don't expect him back before Friday. Is there something I can do for you?"

He flashed an identification folder. "Postal inspector, making a routine inquiry."

"Of course." She brought him into the parlor, where he sat not completely relaxed on the green horsehair sofa. Lucille stood by a chair, but did not sit down. "Is there something wrong?" she asked.

"We have information that parcels are mailed here addressed to David Drexyll. Is that right?"

"It's my husband's practice to ship his merchandise home by parcel post." Lucille felt a cold touch of fear, held herself stiffly waiting.

"Have any come recently?"

"One came just today," she said in a very low voice. "Do you want to see it?"

"If you don't mind."

She brought him the small brown paper parcel from the hall. He noted its postmark in his notebook, handed the parcel back to her. "What's in it?"

"Books. My husband is a bookseller."

"It isn't marked 'books'. He could have mailed it at the lower rate."

"I'm sure he doesn't know. He hasn't been in this country too long."

He made another entry in his book. "Permanent resident?"

"Oh yes."

He put the notebook away and stood up. "Many thanks, Mrs. Drexyll."

She asked with curiosity, "Shall I tell him you were here?"

"As you please," he said kindly. "You're fairly sure he'll be home by Saturday?"

"He's never later than Friday evening. He catches a regular commuter bus from the city. Can't you tell me what this is about?"

"Sorry. I can discuss it only with him. I'll be back Saturday." He left her standing in the parlor doorway.

LUCILLE replaced the parcel at the foot of the stairs. She refused to think. A mistake, a misunderstanding. A routine inquiry.

She went next door to the church. The door was locked, but Pace's car was in the drive, and she heard the rhytym of a typewriter. Pace, in shirtsleeves and tieless, answered her knock.

"For once you catch me fairly respectable," he said. "I've been typing up a few notes for Sunday's sermon."

"Frank—I must talk to somebody or go crazy. I may be imagining things, but do you think anything's—funny about David?"

Pace's animation faded. "Funny?" he asked guardedly.

She told him of the postal inspector. "I know there's something wrong!"

Pace rubbed his chin with the back of his hand, finally opened the door wide. "Come in," he said grimly.

They sat in his study, the typewriter on its wheeled stand between them. Lucille demanded, "What's the mystery? You know something, don't you?"

"Only part of it. Aunt Emily has the rest."

"Emily Hansen too? Why am I last to know?"

"If we'd been first to give you a hint, you'd have hated us for it. Now, you'd better know before your imagination breaks all bounds." He handed her a newspaper clipping. "This is the first one I found. The others are about the same. Thefts from libraries and bookstores, never many books at a time, never enough to be missed right away. Simple—libraries are poorly-guarded places at night. Only a scholar is selective enough to recognize value."

"I can't believe it." Lucille's voice roared in her ears, her world swayed about her. "Not David—it's ridiculous."

"It would seem so, with only this as evidence. But we have a Browning volume that Nathan bought from him. We can prove it further. Would you care to open the parcel that came today?"

"Frank, we can't! It's sneaky and suspicious. I'm supposed to trust David."

"It's up to you. If you'd rather not know—"

"Let's not do anything just yet, please. I want to speak to David first."

"Aunt Emily thinks you'd better watch your step."

"What does she have to do with this?"

"She was about to invest in The Bookstall, and had an investigation made." Pace came to his feet. "If you feel you need me for anything, any time, let me know. I'll be here."

Lucille did not move. Almost to herself she said, "Have I been living on money from stolen merchandise? Money he's talked out of my friends?"

"Do you have an idea how much money he's accumulated, altogether?"

"No. David handles all the accounts."

"Joint accounts?"

She looked up suddenly. "Yes! He had me sign a signature card, each time. Two local banks, also one in Paso Robles, one in Salinas, and another in San Jose. He said he didn't believe in concentrating funds in one place."

"Does that suggest anything to you? Five different banks —spread the accounts around, so no one amount will be too large. Joint accounts, to keep both you and the banks from asking awkward questions."

She shook her head slowly, bewilderedly, trying to force her thoughts into line. Her lifelong training of her daughter had materialized in a grotesque imagery of life for herself. But for her smashed pride, she would have thought it funny. She had stepped willingly into a trap her own smallness and selfishness had prepared long ago.

Pace leaned forward conspiratorially. "You wouldn't want him to skip off to some other part of the world and start this all over, would you?"

"No—" Lucille's expression softened and grew thoughtful. "No, he's not going to do that, Frank."

"Put a stop on those accounts. He can't go far without money."

Lucille stood up. "Please, Frank. Let me do this my way. I do have. . .a personal interest."

He followed her to the outside door. "Careful," he warned. "There's probably enough money involved to make him nasty in a corner."

Lucille smiled tightly. "I may not know David well enough, but I'm sure I know him that well. He's not the passionate, impulsive soul."

"I wish you'd tell me what you're planning."

"No. I'm not sure you'd approve." Lucille would not look at him.

"That's what I'm afraid of. Keep in touch."

"I'll let you know what happens, Frank," she said, and went home.

Lucille's plans swirled rapidly into shape. There must be no delay now that she knew, for she would be unable to deceive for long a man of Drexyll's imagination and astuteness. His reaction she could not anticipate, but she trusted her judgment of the man's personality. Her sense of justice demanded that she put a stop to his refined larceny.

The following day she drove to Paso Robles, Salinas and San Jose, and transferred funds from the banks into a single Matanzas Bay account in her name alone. In the morning she repeated the procedure at the local banks. The total reached $21,764.24. At noon she went home glowing with righteous satisfaction.

"It's my turn now," Lucille said aloud.

FRIDAY was overcast, and in the early afternoon a fitful rain began which increased gradually to a steady downpour. Strained tempers, overcautious drivers, traffic delays, car lights winking on in the early dusk to reflect doubly and wetly on the black pavements.

Along the coast highway at the peak of the homeward rush, rolling sedately at twenty-five miles per hour in a traffic flow which averaged fifty, came Emily Hansen's old open Daimler. She was perched high on the black leather seat, encased in bright yellow oilskins. She drove aloof from the confusion around and beneath her,

oblivious to the stares and the honks.

Grandly she came down the Main Street hill of Matanzas Bay, made a sweeping left turn, went three blocks more and stopped at the Community Church. She found Pace in the church kitchen frying bacon and eggs for his dinner. Her nephew was not surprised to see her.

Emily dropped her oilskins across the back of a chair. "Throw some more of that gunk in the skillet," she said. "I'm eating with you. Is Drexyll home from his week's jaunt yet?"

He glanced out the window at the house next door. "No —his bus will probably be late tonight."

"I'll wait him out," declared Emily. "If you'll tell me where things are in this closet of a kitchen, I'll help get dinner on the table."

"Why won't you let me in on any of this, Aunt Emily?"

"Time enough later. Now, this is my show."

"I hope you're sure of your ground," Pace grumbled.

"Sure enough. If only that idiot Lucille isn't up to trying a few tricks of her own."

"I still say we should turn this whole matter over to the police."

"I want to be there first." Emily cocked her head. "Listen. Was that a car door?"

Pace stepped to the window. "It's a cab—yes, there's Drexyll."

Emily pulled on her oilskins again. "Turn off the stove. Dinner can wait. We'll give him time to get inside and settle down. I'm depending on what you told me, Frank. If they decide to eat at home tonight, we're out of luck."

"They eat out every Friday night," he said with assurance. "The kitchen will be dark."

When they left the church, the only light in the Charters-Drexyll house was in the parlor. They crossed the two yards in the rain and soundlessly entered the side kitchen entrance. The kitchen was black, but a rim of light showed under a connecting door beyond which they heard low voices.

"At any rate," whispered Emily, "the fur hasn't started to fly yet."

"I don't like this at all. I feel like a peeping Tom."

"Stop bottle-feeding your conscience and listen. And if you make a noise, I'll swear up and down it was you who dragged me into this against my better judgment."

Lucille, fresh in a bright afternoon frock of a style which she had adopted in late months,

met her husband in the front hall. Drexyll removed his hat, set his portmanteau on the floor, kissed her lightly.

"You look charming, my dear. Appropriately refreshing, after such a day. Has there been mail?"

"Yes. Several packages," she said, trying to see in him the new person whom she had discovered. "You're not going to work tonight, are you?"

"I shall neither unpack, nor look at the parcels, nor work." He went into the parlor, dropped with a sigh into his favorite chair, a brown leather platform rocker beside his smoking stand. "At the moment I shall relax—and later we shall go out to dinner."

Lucille chose a single chair across the room. Shaking inwardly, she smoothed her skirt across her knees. If he had called at one of the banks—she refused to consider the possibility. "That's nice," she said.

"We spend entirely too little time together," Drexyll said so suddenly that she jumped. He did not notice, as he was filling his pipe. "I promised myself today that hereafter the week is for work, and the weekend for outselves. If the weather clears tomorrow or Sunday, let's take a drive down the coast."

"Oh?" Lucille said, fearing that she would cry, She bit her lip.

He paused before applying the lighter flame to his pipe, looked up. "What is troubling you, Lucille?"

She could not meet his eyes. "Someone came this week, David. A postal inspector."

Slowly Drexyll lit his pipe, frowning his concentration upon the blooming flame. "Yes?"

"He asked about the parcels you mail home."

"Why?" With exaggerated interest he studied the column of new smoke.

"He said it was routine. David—is there something you haven't told me?"

He puffed clamly. "They must be cautious about fraudulent use of the mails. What did you tell him?"

"I couldn't tell him much, except that you were a bookseller and mailed merchandise home. He just asked a few questions, looked at one of the packages, and went away."

"You allowed him to see it?" Drexyll asked with a building brittle anger.

"Of course. Why not?" She lifted her head defiantly. "I wasn't aware we had anything to hide."

He subdued his anger with visible effort, closed his eyes for an instant. "Quite so. But a

stranger prying into my private affairs? What else did he say?"

"Only that he'd be back tomorrow to talk to you."

"Hmm," said Drexyll. Rising abruptly, he went to the front window and looked through the lace curtain at the rain. "Let's extend tomorrow's drive to embrace the weekend, Lucille. Rain or no rain, we may leave tonight. Los Angeles, Capistrano, San Diego—perhaps even dip into Mexico."

"You don't want to meet the postal inspector, do you?"

"There is something *you're* not telling *me*," he said, turning.

Primly Lucille crossed her ankles, folded her hands in her lap, and said with remarkable control, "You wouldn't plan ever to return, would you? You'd leave me stranded somewhere in Mexico, and go your way to some other part of the world where they don't know you."

His pipe trailed fierce clouds of smoke as Drexyll stalked back to his chair. He sat down with precise deliberation. "Whatever are you getting at, Lucille?" Voice casual, face a mask.

"Are you the Phantom Bookworm, David?"

He slid down in the chair. "Oh," he muttered, "that." He chewed gloomily on his pipe.

"Yes, that. It's a delightful little scheme: establish respectability by your pose as a clergyman, create an illusion of permanence by marrying a local woman—"

Drexyll interrupted her sharply: "Marrying you was an unexpected development."

Lucille went on as if she had not heard him: "You maneuver people into investing in a business whose merchandise is mostly stolen. What a clever way to cut down overhead, David! You show a profit, begin repaying your earlier investors, then leave so gracefully, on some errand or other, that no one realizes you're gone until maybe a couple of weeks have gone by. Even then your victims aren't thoroughly convinced of your dishonest intentions. Poor dear Dr. Drexyll. Something dreadful must have happened to him."

A slow smile relaxed Drexyll's features. "My dear," he said affably, "you would not be so voluble, were you not in a bargaining mood. Why have you not called the police?"

"Sentiment, I suppose. And just a little bit of gratitude. You did bring me, for a short time, something I hadn't know for many years: the ability to dream. You've given me my one chance to see the rest of the world and the rest of life,

before I'm too old to appreciate them."

"I have?" Drexyll said suspiciously, removing the pipe from his mouth. "How?"

"Take me with you, David! Wherever you go this time, take me with you."

"Ah?" Drexyll smiled gently. "A touching tribute, Lucille. You oblige me to flee, but you wish to flee with me. You would be compounding a felony, you know."

"Yes," she sparkled, "isn't it thrilling? But I'd be willing to pay the price for these next few months—or however long it took them to catch up with us. Once the time has passed, nobody can take it from me. I won't spend the rest of my life regretting my own indecision. You, if anyone, would concede that life is grim. Only the strong and clever win through; the rest plod along a dusty road to nowhere. You wouldn't expect me to call in the police, chalk all this up to experience, and start vegetating again?"

"Your argument is sound and convincing, Lucille," said Drexyll. "Is it an alternative you offer me? You or the police?"

"No, David. I wouldn't dream of influencing your decision that way. Will you take me?"

Drexyll shook his head. "Much as I am tempted, I cannot. My way is a solitary way.

A man in my position must operate alone, responsible to no one. He can tolerate no continuing relationship which could prove embarrassing."

Lucille had difficulty keeping her voice steady. "Then you won't?"

"I dare not. You understand."

She nodded. "All right. I had some little hope—I thought I knew you better, but I was wrong. Does anyone really know you, David? Do you know yourself? Or have you been putting on an act for so long

that you've forgotten? It's such a good act, I'd almost like to become part of it. If you hadn't made it quite clear my usefulness to you is done."

"See here," said Drexyll, reaching into his inner jacker pocket, "just because I can't risk taking you with me, there's no reason you can't have yourself a time without me." He took out his checkbook. "A generous settlement, my dear. I have never before made such an offer."

"And you can't make it now." Lucille was fighting a choking sensation. "Put that away, David. It's not worth very much."

His studied calm had been pierced. "Explain yourself." Cold, tense.

"Money takes care of everything, doesn't it? All the heartbreak, the humiliation. You've begun to guess. You were so thoughtful to open joint accounts. I accomplished a lot this week."

"Go on." Carefully Drexyll laid his pipe on the smoking stand.

"I didn't close out the accounts, if that's what you're thinking. But you don't know how large a check you can write now, do you?"

Drexyll leaped up, sending the ignored checkbook flying, and strode to her with waving arms. "Dammit, woman, I need funds! I dislike being forced to scurry away like a hunted fox."

"*You* dislike! People dislike being cheated and duped. They dislike being disillusioned by a phony man of God who simultaneously wears the cloth and defiles it."

"Every man to his trade," said Drexyll, again in control of his anger. He returned to his chair, took up the pipe once more, puffed it into life. "My dear Lucille, I have underestimated you. Perhaps we should be in business together."

"My way is a solitary way," she taunted. "No embarrassing relationships."

"It would make the situation rather awkward, but I begin to see possibilities." Drexyll nodded decisively. "Very well. We have little time. Pack only what you need, as much as may be carried in one large piece of luggage."

"You misunderstand, David. I intend to travel alone. You've already refused to take me with you. Money changed your mind. I'd always be afraid of your changing it again—when I was on the other side of the world, with no way of getting back."

Drexyll sighed deeply, knocked out his pipe and put it away in his breast pocket. He came to stand before her. "Where is the money now?"

"That would be telling," Lucille said, smiling secretly.

"With your own pitiful little larceny afoot, you would hardly have banked it. Therefore, you brought it away with you."

"Wrong. It's where you can't touch it."

Suddenly there was a small automatic pistol in his hand. "I am neither a brutal nor a violent man, Lucille, but I shall trouble you for that money."

Lucille felt like laughing. "Not dramatics! You wouldn't have the nerve to use that here."

"Actually," Drexyll said with cool detachment, "I am not sure. I have never been in a similar situation. You are to be congratulated. Now, dear—the money, please."

Lucille looked at him silently for a moment. "David—did you ever love me?"

He made an impatient grimace. "You would not believe me if I said yes, and nothing is to be gained by flowery protestations. I cannot be so cruel as to say it was a pleasant diversion, for no matter what you may think, my emotions are not all on the surface. Lucille, this is deliberate delay. I must insist—the money."

BEYOND HIM Lucille saw emerging from the kitchen the tall oilskinned form of Emily Hansen, heavy cane raised. A flicker of Lucille's eyes warned Drexyll, who turned in time to catch the brass ferrule across his wrist. His numbed fingers dropped the gun, and the tip of the cane, in a continuation of its descending arc, pinned it to the floor.

"Frank," called Emily over her shoulder, "come pick this thing up before somebody gets hurt."

Pace stepped forward and secured the gun. His casual manner of holding it told that he knew how to use it.

Lucille looked unbelievingly at Emily. "Where on earth did you come from?"

"Ask a silly question," grunted Emily. "Out of the rain."

Drexyll, massaging his wrist, looked aslant at Emily with wry admiration. "Madam, you never cease to astonish me."

Hands on hips, Emily surveyed him as she would a museum specimen. "Well, Drexyll, Driscoll, Dunhill, Dowell—whatever your name is. You're quite a notorious character."

He closed his eyes. "It would seem that you have made a few inquiries."

"Oho, have we!" Emily turned to Lucille. "You may as well have it straight, girl. His name isn't Drexyll, he isn't and

never was a preacher. He's a cheap music hall entertainer who's made himself several small fortunes by playing the preacher. Scotland Yard's been looking for him for eighteen years—to say nothing of wives left behind in ports of call. One almost caught up with him in Capetown."

"Wives!" cried Lucille, wheeling upon Drexyll. "So marrying me was an unexpected development?" She flew at him in a rage, fists flying. Drexyll held her off by the wrists with difficulty, and she accomplished a solid kick to his shin.

"Come off it, Lucille," said Emily with surprising gentleness, leading her away by the arm.

Lucille let the tears come. "I'm sorry, Mrs. Hansen. I was almost ready to forgive anything—but not this. How many others like me are there, wondering what ever happened to him?"

"I'd say a good many," said Emily. "He's operated in a dozen different cities that they know of. From Capetown we traced one of them: Mildred Driscoll. I had a long and detailed correspondence with her."

"Mildred!" said Lucille. "The fragile creature from the south country." She walked away from everyone to stand with her face hidden against the curtains of the front window. "What a first-prize sucker I've been! All Ellen's life I preached caution to her, then I give in to a lot of smooth talk."

"You're not the first one," said Emily. "He's an actor, and a good one."

"Lucille," said Drexyll petulantly, "I'm sure this scene is as painful to you as to me. What now? Call in the authorities, tell them I'm a thief and an imposter and a bigamist, thereby humiliating yourself before your friends?"

Lucille turned around slowly. "The humiliation is already a fact," she said. "There's nothing *left* to do but call the police, is there?"

"Tommyrot!" snapped Emily. "You'd only have to give back the money. I liked your earlier idea better—go ahead, see the world."

"Hey, now!" protested Pace.

"Shut up," said Emily.

"But that money is stolen!"

Emily Hansen brandished her cane at him. "Will you shut up?"

Drexyll said, "If you do not intend to notify the authorities, need I remain longer? I can do no more here."

"That's right, David," said Lucille. "You've done enough. You're free to go."

"Thank you, my dear.

Sincerely—I have never regretted a parting more." He moved toward the hall doorway, but Frank Pace blocked him.

"Let him out, Frank," said Lucille.

"I refuse. That money isn't rightfully yours. What sort of a conscience have you?"

"What part does conscience play? I've had too much conscience, till now. I'll merely be enjoying the gains of my hard-working husband. I'll salve my conscience by hunting up the discarded wives of David Drexyll and inviting them to join my tour."

"Say, I like that," said Emily.

"You can't be serious," said Pace.

"I was never more serious," said Lucille. "Wrong, maybe, but who's to judge the percentage of right and wrong?"

Pace would not move. "I insist we call the police."

Emily pounded the cane on the floor for attention. "Wait a minute, both of you. Frank, you're an awful bore. Lucille, how much money is there?"

Lucille delayed her answer slightly, and watched Drexyll as she spoke: "Nearly $22,000." Drexyll grunted as if struck, and her lingering doubt about undiscovered funds was gone.

"That won't go very far," said Emily, "on a world cruise for what may turn into quite a gang of women before you're through. He's been at this for eighteen years." She smiled benignly upon them. "I think I can satisfy everybody except the gentleman in question. On one condition, Lucille, I'll put up $20,000 of my own money for this tour of yours."

Lucille gasped. "But I couldn't possibly accept—"

"One condition, I said. It sounds like fun—I want to go along. If you don't think an old lady would cramp your style. Agreed?"

"Why—oh yes! Yes!"

"All right." Emily leveled her cane at her gaping nephew. "Frank, do your duty as a citizen of Matanzas Bay, and get on the phone."

But the moment that Pace turned, Drexyll was upon his back, toppling him to the floor with the surprise of his attack. The gun fell, and Drexyll caught it up. He faced them from the hall doorway.

"I can do nothing now," he said, "but admit defeat and depart. But I insist that the departure be at my discretion. I apologize in advance for any inconvenience or discomfort I may inflict upon you. I must delay your inevitable telephone call for a reasonable period."

He herded them down the basement stairs and into the fruit cellar, an excavation lined

with concrete and closed by a heavy insulated door.

Pace objected: "You wouldn't put a woman of my aunt's years in a damp hole—"

"Will you kindly leave my age out of this?" bellowed Emily. "Don't spoil the act. I haven't had so much fun in years."

"These are not the most comfortable quarters," conceded Drexyll, "but they are secure and silent. If you do not make your own way out, Lucille will release you when she returns."

"Oh?" said Lucille. "Where am I going?"

"You, my dear, will be kind enough to drive me to the taxi stand. Perhaps your friends will be hesitant to use the telephone while you are with me—even if they do get out."

"Don't go with him," said Pace. "He still wants that money."

"The money is in a bank," said Lucille, "and I don't think David will want to wait around Matanzas Bay till ten o'clock Monday morning."

Drexyll made a slight inclination of his head. "Once more I bow to your superior logic," he said. He closed and latched the heavy door, thrust a peg through the hasp, and motioned Lucille to precede him upstairs. "Look here," he said earnestly, "in my many years of flitting about the globe, I have made this suggestion to no one: won't you come along with me?"

"No, David. I gave you your chance to ask me that."

"Do come. Mexico, South America, Oceania. We can select a Polynesian isle and draw the sea about ourselves like a protective cloak."

"Nice—but I trust nothing you say."

Drexyll looked hurt. "I am sorry you feel that way."

"Maybe I'm sorry too."

Once outside, they rode in silence through the wet streets to the taxi stand beside the bus depot. "I shall leave you here," said Drexyll. "Despite what has happened, I shall always harbor warm memories of you." He climbed out, lifted his portmanteau out of the back. "Think of me, now and then."

"David—were there many others?"

He hunched his shoulders against the rain and shifted his feet impatiently. "Isn't that a rather personal question?"

"No more so to you than to me."

"Do you truly want me to tell you?"

Lucille opened her mouth to answer, then looked away, through the windshield into the slanting needles of rain bright in the headlights. "No. Goodbye, David."

"Goodbye, my dear." Abruptly Drexyll slammed the door and hurried off to the waiting taxi. Lucille watched his lean form pass under the misty glow of the street lamp, and she blinked to keep the tears back. Tall and erect, an excellent figure of a man. Lucille drove away, and did not stay to see him get into the taxi.

Nearing home, her headlights picked out of the wet darkness the yellow form of Emily Hansen climbing into the Daimler. Lucille stopped. "You got loose," she said unnecessarily.

"I was content to stay till you got back," said Emily, "but Frank had to be physical about it and break out."

"Oh dear! Did he do any damage?"

"Splintered the woodwork. I'll make it good. He thinks he sprained his shoulder, too—but that's his problem." The Daimler shuddered into clattering life. She had to shout to make herself heard: "I want to be gone before the gendarmes swarm all over the place. We can talk about our little junket later. Don't wait to be called—come out any time. I'm not getting any younger."

With a lunge that snapped her head back and collapsed the hood of the oilskins about her neck, the Daimler roared away into the rain, and Lucille saw dimly an arm lifted to wave back at her.

Her kitchen light was on, and Frank Pace was waiting in the open doorway. "Are you all right?" he asked.

"Go home, Frank."

"But I'll have to talk to the police."

"It's my home, my husband. I'll talk to the police. Go home—they'll know where to find you."

Pace stepped out into the drive, turned to say something, but shrugged instead, and went away holding his aching shoulder. Lucille came into the parlor in time to hear heavy feet pounding up the porch steps. She dropped hat and coat upon the horsehair sofa, patted her hair before the mirrored coatrack, and opened the door.

The police lieutenant was surprised to see her. "You got back."

"I just took him to the cab stand."

"Cab, eh? Which way did he go?"

"Where can one go from Matanzas Bay? Away."

THE GOVERNMENT man on duty at the Tijuana border crossing was tired—he was going off his late night shift in a few minutes. Perhaps he could make

this taxicab last out his remaining time. He leaned down to peer inside at the haggard driver and the awakened passenger blinking under the bright lights of the international gate.

"Where to?" he asked.

"Tijuana," yawned the driver.

"Where were you born?" asked the government man.

The driver grinned. "What's it to you, Mac?"

"Skip it," said the government man, grinning back. He looked at the black-clad man in the rear seat. "You're not an American, are you, sir?"

"Congratulations, young man." Drexyll groped for the leather folder in which he carried his personal papers. "I'm British. You are observant."

"Got to be, in this business. May I see your visa please?"

Drexyll handed him the folder. "I trust it's all here."

"Mm. Did you check with a British consulate while you were in this country?"

"Dear no, was I supposed to? I fear I'm sadly ignorant of such details."

"Yeah—I fear too. Your consul could have told you your visa expired three days ago."

Drexyll's physical weariness brought a wave of hopelessness over him. "No! Jove, I quite overlooked it. However, no harm done—I'm leaving now."

"It's not that simple. They're touchy about that sort of thing. I'm sorry, but I'll have to hold you in technical custody until headquarters opens in the morning."

Drexyll moaned. Without attempting to argue, he climbed out of the taxi. "Nothing for it but to oblige," he said.

"That's right." The government man turned back to the cabby. "You might as well go home, buddy."

"What about my fare?"

Drexyll sighed, began counting bills from his wallet, then on impulse placed the entire pad of paper money in the startled cabby's hand. "The bonus," he said, "is for any inconvenience I caused by keeping you away from home overnight."

The driver stopped counting halfway through the bills, stuffed them into his pocket, scrambled to take Drexyll's portmanteau from the trunk, and with a blurted "Thank *you*, sir!" jumped back in and sped away.

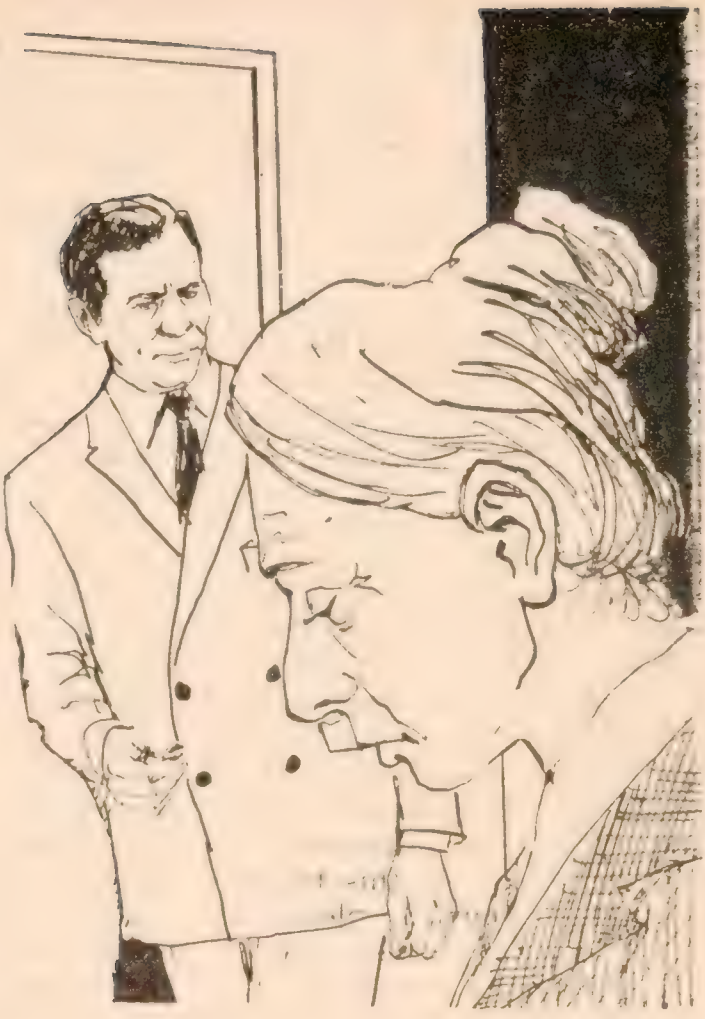
Drexyll accompanied the government man into the office, where in an inner room, visible through a partially opened door, a teletype clicked busily. He said, "The sands are running out."

"Sir?"

"Carry on, young man. You would not understand."

EVERY ONE HAS A SECRET

by EDWARD WELLEN



Everyone had a secret, except Hub Matlock. He had a very quiet life. But a little piece of paper under his rug could remedy that. Unfortunately, someone had a bigger secret . . .

STOPPING TO pick up a package of dry cereal and a container of milk at the corner grocery and a late edition of the local paper at the cigar store, Hub Matlock trudged home from the bus stop. Home? Room, rather.

It was a nice room, recently repapered, though the pretty woodsiness of the pattern would not have been his choice. It was a spacious room, dating from the turn of the century, when labor and materials came cheap.

But Mrs. Willmoth the

roominghouse landlady shrank it in upon itself, with her frail omnipresence, by violating the territorial imperatives. As long as Hub Matlock paid the rent on time and made no nuisance of himself it was *his* room. His *castle.* But Mrs. Willmoth used her master key to snoop.

That was the only word for it. Snoop. In the month he had lived there he had grown aware of the snooping. It showed itself in things subtly out of place.

The evening, for instance, he found his leafy plant leaning inward instead of yearning toward the sun—surely that revealed someone had lifted the pot to see if anything lay hidden under the plastic coaster protecting the night table. Then only yesterday he had come back earlier than usual and actually caught the someone—Mrs. Willmoth—in his room.

Mrs. Willmoth outfaced him, though the top drawer of the dresser hung dangerously open. Her hand to her heart put him in the wrong for startling her. She eyed him accusingly.

"I thought I smelled smoke in here. After all, you know, I have a right to protect my place against fire."

He had no answer to that. He stood slackjawed as she marched out chin high.

No comeback—except later, in fantasy. All that evening, most of that night, and all this day, he had been giving Mrs. Willmoth her comeuppance. He was still working on it when he climbed the stoop, opened the front door, and walked along the hall.

A ceramic skull in the top drawer to scare her out of her skin. A rubber mouse under the bed. A plastic spider on the light cord in his closet. A bear trap—

He felt the savage smile on his face only after Miss Baxter, who had the room to the right of his, pulled back in at his friendly nod instead of venturing out to the bathroom. He flushed. He cast a glance at the door to the left of his as he let himself into his breached castle.

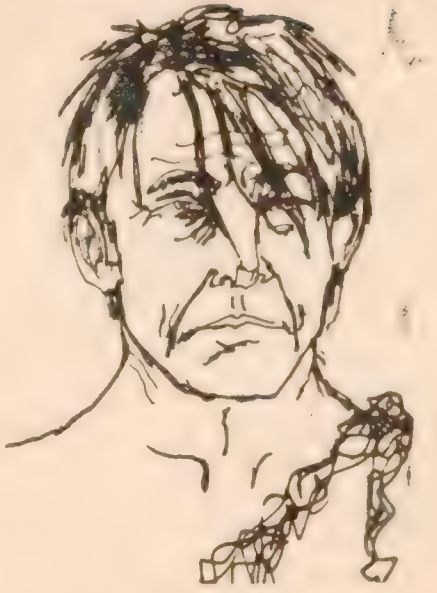
In the month he had never once seen the roomer on the other side. That there was a roomer he knew from an occasional cough or an occasional moan in the night as if out of a nightmare. Whoever that roomer was, did he or she, did Miss Baxter, did all the other roomers too, live under the prying eyes of Mrs. Willmoth? Did they too cringe to think of Mrs. Willmoth probing for the shadowy and the shameful?

His face burned but he smiled a crooked smile. His secret was that he had no sec-

ret. If Mrs. Willmoth only knew, Hub Matlock's mild exterior hid a mild interior, suited to, suited up for, a life of gray days.

He sighed looking back. He sighed looking ahead. Then he smiled looking straight down into his wastebasket at the scraps of paper on the bottom.

They made a different tea-leaf pattern now from the one he had painstakingly arranged this morning and fixed in his mind. His face flamed anew and he felt himself actually shake all over at this further outrage.



But his smile quickly returned. Poor old Mrs. Willmoth now had the beginnings of something to puzzle about. She had pieced the scraps together only to encounter an illegible scrawl. He had been unable to bring himself to write an outright obscenity. If she chose to read something into the scrawl, that was her response and her responsibility.

He downed his cold supper, then unfolded his newspaper. He read slowly to draw it out, to make it last as long into the emptiness as he could.

Local news mirrored world news in a not-too-distorting mirror. Man mistreated and distrusted man as group mistreated and distrusted group.

The Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China were having another bloody border dispute. Here in town a homeowner had punched his neighbor's nose over the building of a spite fence.

The United States was still trying to get the North Vietnamese to account for some bomber pilots missing in action. Here in town the police were still trying to identify the badly mutilated body of a girl found in the woods outside town.

He found in the listings nothing he wanted to hear on the radio or watch on the television tonight. But that did not irk him. He had something better now to do with his spare time.

He would provide himself with a secret that would give

Mrs. Willmoth something to worry about.

But what? And how?

He came out of a trance. He had it.

He tore an item out of the paper. He looked around for an obvious though not-too-obvious hiding place.

Under the throw rug. The danger in throw rugs was that sometimes they threw you. But two feet of the dresser and two feet of the bed moored this throw rug to the floor. If he had anything to hide, under this throw rug would be a likely-unlikely place to hide it. He propped his chair under the door knob.

Grunting, he lifted the iron bed, toed the edge of the throw rug out from under, and lowered the bed. He rolled the rug back and smiled. Poor old Mrs. Willmoth. All that effort merely to hide a badly-bleached-out and poorly-matched-up spot.

He put the news item on the floor. He set it at an angle to the flow of the floorboards and with faint pencil strokes at the corners to fix its position.

Carefully he covered it and carefully he got the edge of the rug back in place under the legs of the bed and carefully he dogeared one of the corners of the rug under the bed to show Mrs. Willmoth he had tampered with the lay of the rug. He waited for the morrow.

Stopping to pick up a loaf of bread and a jar of swirled-together peanut butter and jelly at the corner grocery and a late edition of the local paper at the cigar store, Hub Matlock strode home from the bus stop.

The hallway was empty. Hub Matlock let himself into his room. He did not take off his jacket. He did not unfold the paper.

He set the paper and the groceries down and tilted his chair against the door, wedging the top rail under the door knob.

Now. He bent to peer under the bed. The dogear was gone.

He bared his teeth in satisfaction. But that was not yet the true test. It remained possible that the dogear had straightened itself out.

Grunting, he lifted the bed, toed the edge of the throw rug out from under, and lowered the bed. Carefully he rolled the rug back.

The news item lay there still, in the same position, and he felt a jump of letdown. But when he brought his eyes close to the floorboards he found the paper was out of register with the faint pencil strokes. He felt a jump of braceup.

How poor old Mrs. Willmoth must have sweated and

strained! How she must be worrying this very instant!

Smiling he ate his cold supper and smiling he read the paper and smiling he made ready for bed and smiling he fell asleep.

He wakened. Something had wakened him. What? It seemed to him it had something to do with the door to his room. Afterechoes sounded in his mind, a soft click, a tentative rattling. He looked at the door.

Moonlight showed him the knob was not turning, the door was not shaking, the chair still leaned lazily against the door.

He lay back. Only his imagination. He had been dreaming. A draft had shaken the door and he had worked that into his dream. He sat up.

Wide awake he had heard another sound. A hushed voice, urging.

Then, like a shark's fin slitting water, the gleaming tip of a knife blade slit the wallpaper from the other side. In three swift hissing slashes it cut around the jamb of a hidden door between his room and the one on the left.

Before he could throw off his covers the door swung open.

Light from the other room showed him a looming hulk. Hub Matlock stared at a straggle of hair wilder than Mrs. Willmoth's, stared at pale, pale skin, stared at what—man in body, child in mind—shambled toward him with a soft moan.

The threat of the knife pinned him to the bed as from behind the hulk Mrs. Willmoth spoke in a driving whisper.

"That's him, Sonny. He knows about the girl that had this room before him. I found a clipping about her he hid under the rug. They won't understand you couldn't help yourself, so you have to get rid of him too to keep the secret."

In the Next Issue:

THE CLUE OF THE PEKING MAN

The New Complete MIKE SHAYNE Short Novel

by BRETT HALLIDAY

The bones brought a pack of hunters to Miami, a pack that left a trail of death for Mike Shayne to follow! Soon after the bomb threat to his friend, Tim Rourke, Rourke himself had disappeared, and a lonely, frightened woman had been brutally murdered in her home...

THE CASE OF THE HERTZELL INHERITANCE

by JOSEPH PAYNE BRENNAN

She told a tale of murder—a murder which no one believed had happened. Only Lucius Leffing had faith in her. His faith almost cost him his life.

ONE EARLY September evening Lucius Leffing telephoned to tell me that he expected a client to call at Seven Autumn Street on the afternoon of the following day. As usual, he invited, but did not actually solicit, my somewhat dubious assistance.

Before two p. m. the next day I was seated in my friend's familiar Victorian living room, awaiting the arrival of his new client.

Leffing knew almost nothing concerning the case. His client—a Miss Alma Camlee of Brandlemere Falls, Connecticut—had refused to divulge any details whatsoever over the telephone.

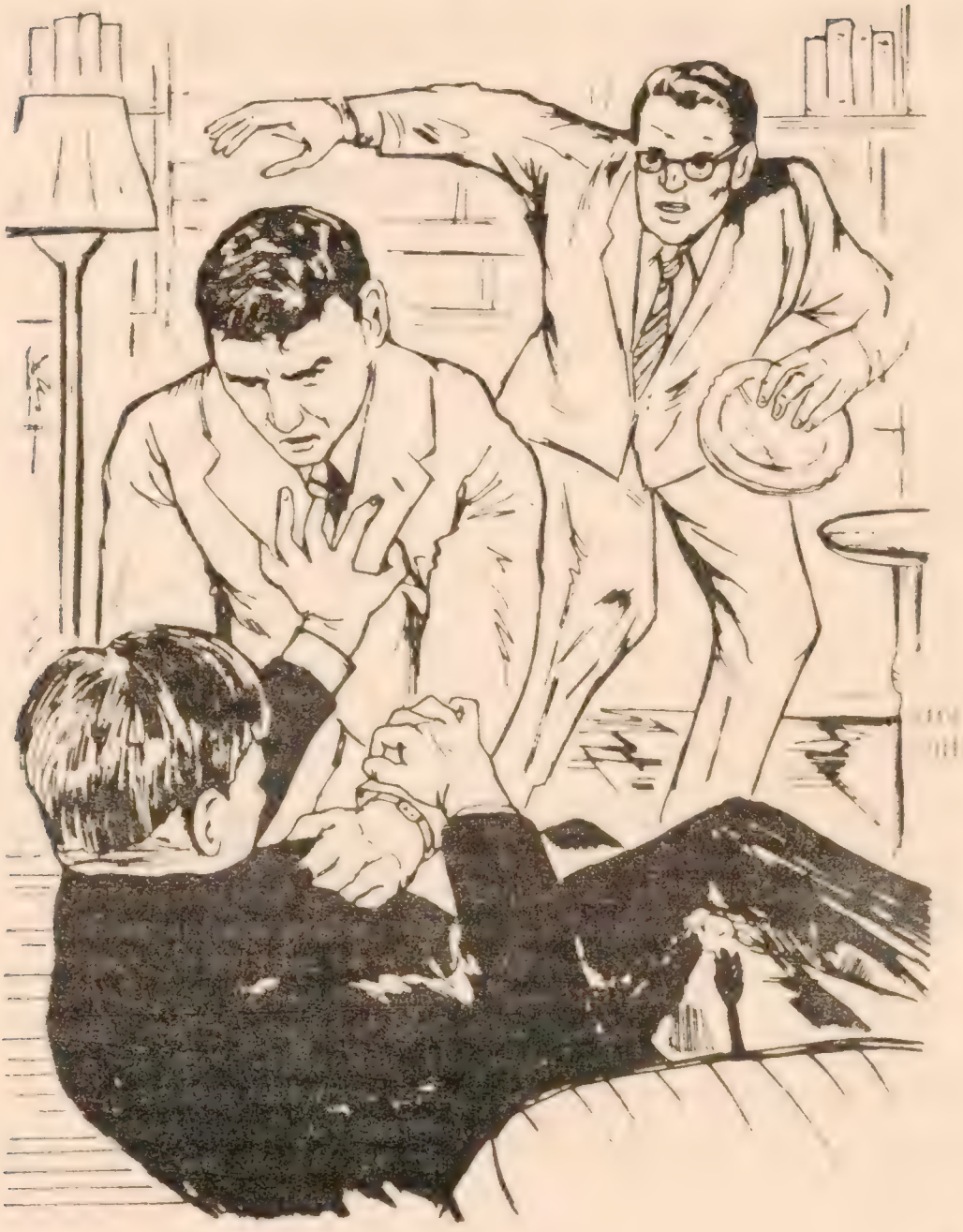
As we waited, Leffing leaned back in his favorite Morris chair and stretched his long legs. "At this point," he remarked, "I have only a name and a place. As a matter of fact, I have no idea where Brandlemere Falls might be located."

"It's in the northwest part of the state," I told him. "You drive through the Winsted area to get there."

He nodded. "Pleasant country as I recall."

The door chimes sounded and Leffing ushered in Miss Alma Camlee. She looked like a faded daguerreotype come to life —somber of countenance, soberly attired in an old-fashioned dress of fusty black taffeta, grey-black hair coiled in an

A New LUCIUS LEFFING Novelet



unattractive bun at the back of her head. I judged her to be about sixty.

After introductions, she primly seated herself, regarding me with obvious hostility.

Leffing spoke quickly to put her at ease. "Mr. Brennan has worked closely with me in most of my recent cases," he assured her. "He may be trusted without reservation."

Her stern face relaxed slightly. "Very well, Mr Leffing. I will accept your word as to this gentleman's character."

She paused, as if groping for words. "Before I reveal my —suspicions—I must know the exact amount of your fee."

Leffing frowned with irritation. "My dear Miss Camlee, I cannot possibly mention a fee until I know the circumstances which confront me. Beyond that, I will say only that my charges are usually based on my client's ability to pay."

Although it was evident that this reply did not entirely satisfy Miss Camlee, she finally nodded. "Well, I shall hope to pay your fee out of my small savings, but I am so sure my poor cousin, Hamilton Hertzell, was murdered, I am prepared to mortgage my house if necessary!"

"I doubt that will be necessary," Leffing told her. "But kindly continue. What makes you so positive your cousin was murdered?"

Miss Camlee's thin lips tightened. 'I have no positive proof, as you gentlemen probably call it, but everything points to murder. My cousin's nephew and heir, Martin Borroway, is an improvident, feckless, profligate, vicious young man!"

Leffing's eyebrows arched. "Indeed!"

Miss Camlee straightened in her chair. "My cousin, Hamilton Hertzell, was a retired gentleman of means who had resided in Brandlemere Falls for many years. At one time he dealt in securities, conservative securities, in New York. He retired some fifteen years ago. He occupied himself with researches into local history and other antiquarian lore. He was very well respected in Brandlemere Falls. Everyone looked up to him."

Leffing inclined his head. "A gentleman of the old school, I'm sure, Miss Camlee. But let me ask a somewhat personal question. Did your cousin, Hamilton Hertzell, remember you in his will?"

A faint tinge of color crept into Miss Camlee's face. The thin line of her lips was scarcely visible. "My cousin's will hasn't yet been read, except by his own attorney of

course. But I have every reason to believe that I was left only a nominal sum of money plus a few family trinkets. I am positive that the bulk of the estate will go to Hamilton Hertzell's nephew, Martin Borroway—his murderer!"

Leffing got up and took a turn about the room. "Dear me, Miss Camlee, these are very serious charges. Can you present any evidence which supports such a conclusion?"

Miss Camlee flushed with long-suppressed fury. "Martin Borroway got tired of waiting, that's all! Hamilton Hertzell had been generous with him. Gifts, loans that I'm sure were never repaid, but that irresponsible little snit couldn't wait to get his hands on the whole estate. He'll squander it in a year!"

Leffing sighed and sat down. "My dear Miss Camlee, you are merely expressing an opinion. It, of course, may be justified by facts which later come to light. But a court of law requires concrete evidence which stands up under rigorous scrutiny. Mere opinion simply will not prevail."

Miss Camlee, momentarily at a loss for words, sat silent.

Leffing resumed. "How did your cousin come to his death?"

"According to Henry Jenkins, Brandlemere Falls' only doctor, he died of a sudden heart attack. But I don't believe it! He'd never known a sick day in his life and only a few weeks before his death, Jenkins had given him a complete physical examination and pronounced him in perfect health!"

Leffing shook his head. "The two sets of facts do not necessarily conflict, Miss Camlee. Unfortunately, heart attacks cannot usually be predicted. An electrocardiogram will show evidence of a heart attack which has already occurred, but it will not, in many cases, indicate that a heart attack is impending, even imminent."

Miss Camlee, baffled into silence, remained where she sat, still frowning.

Leffing went on questioning her. "Aside from the heart attack—or presumed heart attack—was there any evidence at all, however slight, which might indicate foul play?"

Miss Camlee replied reluctantly. "When my cousin was attacked, he was out walking in a sort of rocky meadow which comprised part of his land. As he fell, he struck the side of his neck against a sharp stone. There was a small cut and some bleeding. But Doctor Jenkins called the wound superficial. He said it could not have caused death even if poor

Hamilton had lain there stunned for hours."

Leffing resumed, "Who discovered your cousin's body and how long after death was it found?"

Miss Camlee looked at him defiantly. "Martin Borroway found the body! Naturally he knew where to look, having left it there! It was part of his scheme to divert suspicion from himself! He claims now that he stopped at Hamilton's house and not finding him in—but with the car in the garage—became alarmed. Started rambling over the meadowland, looking for him. Poppycock!"

Leffing scrutinized his client keenly. "I see. But you did not answer the second part of my question, Miss Camlee."

She shrugged. "Doctor Jenkins estimates the body lay in the meadow for two hours or more. More likely it was ten minutes!"

Leffing smiled faintly. "Dear me, Miss Camlee, you seem to harbor scant respect for the medical opinions of your local practitioner!"

Alma Camlee flushed angrily again. "Jenkins is a doddering old fool who should be retired! He treated me for ulcers nine years ago and I still have them, worse than ever!"

Leffing looked properly concerned. "You have my sympathy, Miss Camlee. Ulcers, however, sometimes resist treatment by even the best physicians."

He arose and strode across the room. "Have the final obsequies been held for your cousin, Miss Camlee?"

She dropped her eyes with an air of guilt. "Three days ago. He's dead and buried without an autopsy and Martin Borroway won't even discuss an exhumation."

Leffing frowned. "You have broached this matter to the authorities at Brandlemere Falls?"

She looked grim. "Naaman Tolson, he's the so-called 'law' in Brandlemere Falls, simply laughed in my face!"

"Naaman Tolson is chief of police?"

She nodded scornfully. "In name only. About all he does is sit on the porch at Poorington's General Store and play checkers with the other loafers!"

Leffing resumed his chair. "You present me with a dilemma, Miss Camlee. You seem positive that murder has occurred—yet you present not one shred of actual evidence to support your suspicions. The mere fact that Martin Borroway was impatient to receive his inheritance does not cast him in the role of murderer."

Miss Camlee arose stiffly.

"Very well, Mr. Leffing. If you are unwilling to undertake the investigation, I shall seek help elsewhere."

Arising, Leffing appeared to hesitate. "Let me review the circumstances in my mind, Miss Camlee. Leave your telephone number and I will inform you of my decision within the next twenty-four hours —unless you are unwilling to wait that long."

Miss Camlee bowed. "As you wish, Mr. Leffing. I'm sure a single day won't matter."

After writing her telephone number on a slip of paper, she swept toward the door.

Leffing returned to the living room and sat down. "Well, should I accept this amorphous case or not? What do you say, Brennan?"

"If I were in your shoes," I told him, "I'd have nothing to do with it. She's just an embittered old maid who hates the nephew because he's getting the bulk of the estate. Probably she's been sitting around brooding every minute since her wealthy cousin died. She feels cheated and cut off. I have no doubt she's well aware that a convicted murderer cannot inherit his victim's estate!"

"On the surface it would appear that you are correct. And yet—" He hesitated. "Well, perhaps I shall just sleep on the matter and make my decision tomorrow morning."

Shortly before I left a few minutes later, I assured him that I would be happy to accompany him to Brandlemere Falls, if he decided to accept the case. But I strongly urged him to forget the whole business.

HE TELEPHONED late the next morning to tell me that he had taken the case.

After lunch, we drove north toward Brandlemere Falls.

"You have learned nothing further?" I asked him.

"Nothing. Hamilton Hertzell is not listed in *Who's Who* nor in *Who's Who in the East*. We'll have to wait until we reach the

scene of the crime—if there was a crime!"

We drove through Winsted, heading north and slightly west, and reached Brandlemere Falls by mid-afternoon. It was scarcely more than a village, a somnolent-looking town, with carefully-tended wineglass elms growing along the main street and a center consisting of several stores, a post office, a steeple church and scattered private homes. An abandoned stable and feed store with a sagging roof stood a few blocks away down the main street.

After inquiries, we found that we could obtain rooms at Miss Delaporte's "Establishment", a sort of part-time inn which apparently catered to "summer people."

Miss Delaporte, an elderly but very brisk little woman, conducted us to two connecting rooms with an attached bath. Although the furnishings were somewhat outmoded, the rooms were clean. We unpacked our bags and sat down in reed rockers, which were creaky but comfortable.

"What's the first order of business?" I asked, stretching to rid myself of driver's cramp.

Leffing leaned back in his rocker. "Perhaps a brief interview with Brandlemere's checker-playing chief of police. What do you say?"

I got up. "Fine! I certainly need some exercise!"

Miss Alma Camlee had given us correct information in regard to Naaman Tolson's routine. We located the chief of police on the porch of Poorington's General Store, playing checkers with an old crony.

Tolson was a grizzled gentleman of sixty-odd with a protruding pot belly. He wore ordinary farm clothes and no badge was visible. He regarded us with surprise and more than a trace of irritation.

Leffing apologized. "I am indeed sorry to interrupt your game, Chief Tolson, but we did have a few questions."

Tolson got up reluctantly, took a last long look at the checker board, as if he were trying to make a mental photograph of it, and nodded toward a frame office building across the street.

"Office over there," he explained laconically, starting down the porch steps.

Easing himself into a swivel chair alongside an antique roll-top desk, Tolson motioned us toward a couple of straight-backed office chairs which were even more uncomfortable than they looked.

Succinctly, Leffing explained the purpose of our visit.

Tolson listened impassively,

not volunteering a word until Leffing had finished.

At length he hitched around in his chair and poked at some envelopes on his desk. "Alma Camlee's crazy! Always was pretty sour on life. She's just mad because that frisky nephew's getting old Hertzell's money."

He spread his hands. "Hamilton Hertzell died of a heart attack. What do you want me to do—dig him up and interview him?"

Leffing arose. It was obvious to me that he was nettled. "It's a bit late for an interview, Chief Tolson, but—who knows?—perhaps we shall dig him up!"

Tolson sat silently as we walked out.

"Not a very cooperative cuss, is he?" I commented as we started back up the street.

Leffing shrugged. "It was just about what I expected. Well, so much for now. Tomorrow we shall make a fresh start."

"Who's next on our list?" I inquired.

"Doctor Jenkins, I believe. I fully expect the same kind of reception as we just received, but I'm afraid there's no help for it."

I did not reply. I was more convinced than ever that Leffing had made a mistake in accepting the case, but I didn't want to labor the point under the circumstances.

After a shower and a hearty supper served in person by Miss Delaporte, we lingered on the inn's veranda until dusk and then retired to our rooms. Leffing sat in his rocker, lost in thought, while I read magazines which I had brought along.

Early the next morning we started out for Doctor Jenkins' office. Since it was only a few blocks from the center of town, we decided to walk.

Apparently Doctor Jenkins was not an early riser. He met us at the door wearing bedroom slippers and a moth-eaten bathrobe. Grey stubble covered his pudgy face. I judged him to be in his eighties.

As Leffing explained the purpose of his visit, the old doctor ran a hand through his uncombed hair and peered over the top of his thick lenses. He did not invite us in.

"You've come on a fool's errand, sir!" he grumbled. "Hamilton Hertzell died of a heart attack. Every indication of it. No reason for an autopsy. Waste of time. You big-city meddlers cause a lot of trouble! Now I'm getting back to my breakfast!" He slammed the door in our faces.

As we turned away, Leffing was white with rage. We

walked a few blocks before I ventured a suggestion.

"Why don't we give it up? We'll take a drive over to Alma Camlee's place—I understand it's right on the outskirts—explain that we've run into the proverbial stone wall and let it go at that."

We were nearly back at Miss Delaporte's before Leffing replied. "Ordinarily, I would take your advice. But the kind of reception we've received in this benighted hamlet simply rouses a stubborn streak in me. I am now determined to push on until we've exhausted every lead, examined every possible shred of evidence and looked carefully into every circumstance which might impinge on the case—however remotely!"

I realized it was useless to object. I had seen Leffing in such a mood before and I knew that he would now probe ahead relentlessly until all potential evidence turned to chaff and there was simply no area left in which to act.

We sat on Miss Delaporte's front veranda for a few minutes. I remained silent. Leffing, face cupped in hand, hunched over in his chair, brooding with half-closed eyes.

At length he stood up. "Would you care to drive over to Martin Borroway's house?"

Following Miss Delaporte's directions, we drove down the main street between the wineglass elms, continued on for a mile or so, turned left on a dirt road and within another ten minutes stopped in front of Martin Borroway's home, an extensively renovated farmhouse which appeared to be in fair shape except for some peeling paint and a couple of cracked window panes.

Martin Borroway was standing inside a screen door as we walked up the porch steps. Opening the door, he bowed formally.

"Well, I am honored! Holmes and Walson come to inspect my little nest!"

He straightened up and his loose features crinkled into a sardonic grin. I thought he was going to burst into laughter. Instead he merely giggled.

"Relax, gentlemen! The corpses are buried in the back garden! All you need do is dig a little!"

It was of course obvious that our identities and the reason for our presence in town had preceded us. Borroway giggled again, inwardly convulsed, it appeared, at his own stale wit. I disliked him immediately and intensely but Leffing gave no indication of his own emotions.

He was brisk and businesslike. "Mr. Borroway, we are investigating the death of your

uncle, Hamilton Hertzell. May we ask you a few questions?"

Borroway waved us inside. "My pleasure, gentlemen! Sorry I don't have cocktails mixed. It's a bit early—even for me!"

Still giggling, he ushered us into a room which had been fixed up as a kind of "party" spot or lounging area. Modernistic furniture stood scattered about. I supposed the room had once served as the old farmhouse "parlour".

After we were seated, Leffing lost no time on preliminaries. "Mr. Borroway, you are your uncle's chief heir?"

Martin Borroway grinned. "I believe the old boy—ah—remembered me. The will should be read in a day or so."

"Hamilton Hertzell's cousin, Miss Alma Camlee," Leffing continued, "is firmly convinced that your uncle was murdered. Have you any reason to believe that this may be the case?"

Borroway threw back his head and shook with squeaky laughter. For a minute or two his loose mouth seemed incapable of forming words.

"That dried-up old dragon!" he gasped. "She's just fuming because I'm coming into the estate. Poor old Hamilton dropped dead of a heart attack. There's no doubt of it."

"I was not particularly impressed with Doctor Jenkins,"

Leffing replied. "He appears to be teetering on the edge of senility."

Borroway shook a finger with mock concern. "Shockin' thing to say!" he admonished. "Jenkins could sue for defamation, or libel, or something."

Leffing ignored this comment. "Miss Camlee tells me you found your uncle's body. Would you care to describe the events of that day?"

Borroway sighed with impatience. "You super-sleuths never give up, do you? Precious little to describe. I drove around to look in on the old boy, as I do occasionally of a mid-afternoon. Don't recall the

exact time. Well, he didn't answer the door. At first I thought nothing of it. Then I noticed that his car was in the garage. I got a bit worried. Walked around the house, peeked in a couple of windows. No sign of him. North of the house there's a series of open fields. Part of the estate. Thirty acres or more. Not good for much. Boulders and brush. But the old boy used to like mucking around in there. Often took walks in the afternoon."

Restlessly, Borroway shifted in his chair. "Well, I just thought I'd take a look. Not really worried. Figured he might have twisted his ankle or stumbled over a rock. I walked about fifteen or twenty minutes, peering around, and was just about to turn back, when I found him. Sprawled out in a clearing surrounded by big boulders and scrub brush. I thought at first he'd fainted. Then I felt for his pulse. Wasn't any. I left him there and high-tailed it to town for Jenkins. That's all there was to it. Jenkins came, pronounced him dead and they carried him off to Flidd's Funeral Home."

Leffing inclined his head. "Thank you, Mr. Borroway. An abbreviated but perhaps adequate account. Just one question. Did you notice any signs of violence on the body—any indication that your uncle might have been struck or shoved, for instance?"

Martin Borroway appeared to ponder for a moment. "No, nothing like that, really. He had a small cut on one side of his neck. Not much bleeding. Jenkins said that when he dropped dead, he toppled over onto a protruding stone. It gashed the skin of his neck a bit. Nothing else. Clothes not even wrinkled. No sign of violence."

Leffing got up. "I appreciate your cooperation, Mr. Borroway. I might add it's the first I've encountered since entering Brandlemere Falls—if we except the efficient Miss Delaporte."

Borroway arose. "These hick towns don't go much for Sherlock Holmes stuff! Better toddle back to New Haven, Mr. Leffing, before they get out the tar and feathers!"

He giggled uncontrollably at the hilarious image which this warning apparently projected.

AS WE DROVE back toward the village, Leffing had little to say. I volunteered the opinion that if murder had been committed, Borroway certainly appeared to be the logical suspect.

Leffing frowned. "The term 'logical suspect', sometimes strikes me as the most illogical phrase in existence. 'Logical' to

whom? From whose point of view? At what stage of the investigation and under what circumstances?"

"Dropping the adjective, 'logical', then," I persisted, "what other suspect is there?"

"There is only one other suspect whose name I would even venture to suggest at this point—Miss Alma Camlee."

I looked at him in astonishment. "But why on earth would she instigate an investigation if she herself is the murderer, or rather murderess?"

Leffing glanced at me impatiently. "Sometimes you disappoint me! You yourself suggested the motive not five minutes after Miss Camlee left Autumn Street. If Borroway were convicted of murder, Alma Camlee would inherit Hamilton Hertzell's estate—unless his will contains clauses of which we are at present unaware "

Back at Miss Delaporte's, Leffing sank into a rocker. His only word to me was a request that I drive to one of the local stores and buy a carton—or preferably a case—of sarsaparilla.

I carried out this errand with reluctance and a sense of depression. Judging from past experience, I feared my friend would probably spend hours, or even days, sprawled in his rocker sipping sarsaparilla while his scalpel-like brain searched for a further avenue of investigation.

For once I was pleasantly surprised. After only a few minutes, he announced that, following lunch, if I had no objection, we would drive out to interview a Mr. Clement Ellison, Hamilton Hertzell's nearest neighbor. Leffing added that much of the Hertzell land lay adjacent to a large state-maintained forest area, but that part of it was situated next to Clement Ellison's holdings.

"What do you know about Ellison?" I asked, as we drove out again between the wineglass elms.

"Precious little," Leffing admitted. "Retired. Elderly but still hale. Somewhat reserved, but well enough liked. Moderately wealthy. Not a native of Brandlemere Falls, but a long-time resident. A good friend of Hertzell's."

I glanced at him. "Your 'precious little' actually seems to encompass quite a bit!"

He smiled at me with half-lowered lids. "I made the most of my time while you were getting the sarsaparilla. Miss Delaporte has accumulated quite a fund of information concerning the local residents!"

Clement Ellison lived off a freshly blacktopped road about three miles from the center of

Brandlemere Falls. We nearly passed his private driveway, but Leffing noticed a blurred, poorly painted sign reading *Clement C. Ellison* just in time.

"Amateurish sign painter," Leffing commented as I pulled into the drive. A few yards ahead lay a neat grey fieldstone house tastefully set off by carefully-trimmed evergreen shrubs. Two large maples towered at the rear of the moderately-sized stone house.

We rang the bell and waited. Very shortly a stout, well-groomed gentleman with a somewhat florid complexion opened the door. After Leffing explained his errand, Mr. Ellison invited us in. He appeared cordial but somewhat restrained in manner.

After I was introduced, Ellison led us to a sort of combined library-study where we were seated in worn but comfortable oversized armchairs.

The decor of the room was decidedly masculine. Aside from shelves of leather-bound books, sporting prints and hunting trophies decorated much of the wall space. Several target pistols and an elaborately-carved antique fowling piece were displayed as well.

Ellison seated himself in an armchair opposite us.

Leffing came directly to the heart of the matter. "There is some reason to believe that Hamilton Hertzell was murdered, Mr. Ellison. Since you are his nearest neighbor, I thought it just possible that you might have noticed some incident or bit of evidence which would be useful to us. Were you at home on the afternoon when Hertzell's body was found?"

Ellison rubbed his chin in surprise and perplexity. "Murdered, you say? I had no idea of that! Did you actually find evidence of murder? We all assumed it was just another tragic heart attack!"

"Let us say, Mr. Ellison," Leffing replied, "that we are at present only searching for evidence which may confirm our suspicion of murder."

Ellison nodded. "Whole business sounds a bit fantastic to me, but of course I don't question your sincerity." He paused. "Well, let me see. Yes, I was home. I had spent most of that afternoon right here in the house, puttering around. A few odd jobs. I also did a spot of reading too, some sporting journals I wanted to look into. Believe I took a brief cat nap late in the afternoon. I didn't hear of poor Hertzell's death till early evening when I drove into town to pick up a few items at Poorington's store."

Leffing looked disappointed. "You saw or heard nothing which was—in even a slight degree—unusual or worth remarking on?"

Ellison shook his head. "Not a thing. Hamilton took strolls around his back pastures now and then. Nothing unusual in that."

Leffing lifted a finger. "Prior to this, I've heard Hertzell's acreage referred to as 'meadow'. You use the term 'pasture'. Was there any livestock roaming loose in there?"

Ellison shook his head impatiently. "No, no, it's just a term. I believe some cows were kept in various of those lots many years ago. But there's nothing now. Actually 'pasture' is a misnomer. Even though a few cows were turned loose in there long ago, it's scarcely a grazing area. Too barren and stony."

Leffing continued. "Can you think of anyone who might want to kill Hamilton Hertzell?"

Ellison hesitated. "Well, his nephew, Martin Borroway, is a bit of a scamp and a spendthrift, but I don't think he'd kill anyone!"

Leffing remained silent and presently Ellison spoke, "Really, gentlemen, I am curious. Would it be impertinent if I inquired who—ah—started you off on this strange inquiry?"

"Miss Alma Camlee," Leffing told him.

Ellison waved his arms with an abrupt gesture of dismissal. "Pshaw! You are wasting your time then! Alma's just a sour old maid. She hates Borroway, and always has. And of course it's pretty certain that he's coming into the estate. She's just trying to delay a settlement and cause as much trouble as possible. Pure spite, gentlemen, pure spite! Take my advice, clear out and have nothing more to do with the matter! You'll just end up a laughing stock!"

Leffing got up. "That is al-

ways a risk in any investigation, Mr. Ellison. An occupational hazard, you might say!"

Ellison conducted us to the door, where Leffing thanked him for his cooperation.

"We seem to have drawn another blank," I commented, as we drove off.

"It would appear so, Brennan," Leffing agreed. "It would appear so."

The rest of the day dragged. After dinner, I took a turn around the village and then read. Leffing sat, silent and moody, sipping sarsaparilla.

The next morning he asked me if I would care to drive him to Titusville, a small town some twenty miles from Brandlemere Falls. We were well on the way before he offered an explanation.

"While you were out walking last evening," he told me, "I had a brief chat with Miss Delaporte. She mentioned that quite some months ago a friend of hers who lives in Titusville had seen Hamilton Hertzell prowling about the place. He spent some time in the town clerk's office and was later seen strolling in the local churchyard."

"Miss Camlee told us he was interested in local history and 'antiquarian lore', as she expressed it," I reminded him. "Do you actually believe his trip to Titusville has any significance?"

Leffing frowned at the passing landscape. "At this point, Brennan, I have an open mind on the subject. Beyond that, when one is clutching at proverbial straws, one grasps whichever straw happens to float by at the moment."

Titusville was an isolated country town only slightly larger than Brandlemere Falls. The town clerk, who was asleep in a chair when we entered his office, had only a vague recollection of Hertzell. He recalled that Hertzell had looked through some old bound volumes of local vital statistics, but he was uncertain of the years and could tell us nothing more.

After lunch at the town's single restaurant, we took a walk in the churchyard. Although the cemetery was kept in good condition, many of the gravestones, dating back well over a century, were so weather-worn their inscriptions were undecipherable. Most of the names still legible were the usual "Yankee" ones: Bates, Searle, Hayes, Gaines, etc. A few, though English in origin, were less familiar: Holborn, Rangloft, Curlane, etc.

"I'm afraid," I said as we got in the car for the return trip to Brandlemere Falls, "that we

have drawn yet one more blank."

Leffing agreed with me. He appeared irritated and depressed and the conversation lagged.

As we sat on Miss Delaporte's veranda after dinner that evening, I asked whether he intended to pursue the investigation further.

He looked up morosely. "Well, another day or two can do no harm. Perhaps something will turn up."

THE NEXT DAY I drove down to Winsted to buy some magazines and newspapers which were unavailable in Grandlemere Falls. When I returned, early in the afternoon, Leffing appeared somewhat more hopeful.

"For want of something better to do, " he told me, "I spent an hour in the village library. It's open from ten a. m. until one p. m. each day."

I glanced at him in surprise. "I didn't know they even had a library!"

He smiled. "It's a single large room located in the church basement."

"Did you come across anything of interest?"

He held out a small pamphlet. "I was permitted to take this out overnight."

The pamphlet was a twenty-page genealogy of a family named Monkhill. An attractive coat of arms, illustrated in color, graced the frontispiece. The title page read: *"A Genealogy of the Monkhill Family, by Hamilton Hertzell. Brandlemere Falls, Conn. 1968."*

I handed it back with a shrug. "Hertzell's antiquarian interests obviously extended to family origins. Interesting certainly, but does it have any meaning for us?"

"I thought not," Leffing replied, "until Miss Delaporte informed me that for the past year or more Hamilton Hertzell and Miles Monkhill had not been on speaking terms!"

"And who the devil is Miles Monkhill?"

"He lives about five miles from here. Actually within the township of Brandlemere Falls. At one time he operated that stable and feed store you see crumbling into ruins down the main street. Miss Delaporte cannot supply any details, but she recollects that the 'falling out', as she calls it, occurred at the time this little pamphlet appeared."

"Perhaps," I suggested, "we had better have a chat with Miles Monkhill."

"Exactly. We can leave now, if it suits your convenience."

Although I had scant hope that anything would be gained by an interview with Miles

Monkhill, I was glad enough to be on the move. I still felt firmly convinced that Leffing had made one of the major mistakes of his career in accepting the case. Movement at least gave the illusion of possible headway. Anything was better than sitting in our rooms at Miss Delaporte's while Leffing sipped sarsaparilla and studied the ceiling cracks.

Miles Monkhill occupied a relatively new brick house just off the highway north of Brandlemere Falls. He was clipping privet hedges as we drove into the dooryard.

He appeared to be in his mid-sixties, thin but muscular-looking, with a sun-browned face and alert eyes. He set down his hedge clippers and surveyed us quizzically as we walked up the drive.

After the usual routine formalities, Leffing inquired if he might ask a few questions.

Monkhill nodded toward the house. "Might as well come in and we'll get it over with. I'd heard you were in town."

Our host waved us to chairs in the small living room. "You'll have to overlook the clutter. I'm not much on housework. Rather work outside."

Leffing glanced around the room. "It looks quite orderly to me. You are a bachelor then?"

Monkhill shook his head. "My wife died some years ago, but I'm still not used to living alone."

As I looked about the room, I noticed a framed coat of arms, in color, on the opposite wall.

Leffing gestured toward it. "That is what brought us here. I have the booklet which Hamilton Hertzell compiled for you."

Monkhill smiled ruefully. "Figures. I suppose you heard we had a row over it too?"

"I heard you stopped speaking to Hertzell at about the time the pamphlet appeared," Leffing told him. "Did you find some gross error in the compilation?"

"No gross error. Hertzell took pride in his genealogical research. He did a good job."

He nodded toward the coat of arms. "He dug that out for me. I didn't even know I rated one, until he wrote to some place in England and got details. He traced the Monkhills right back to the time of William the Conquerer!"

"Indeed!" Leffing exclaimed. "Then your termination of friendship with him did not concern the booklet?"

Monkhill rubbed his chin reflectively. "Well, actually it did. Not the work but the terms. We had agreed on a payment and then, just before the pam-

phlet was due from the Printer's, Hertzell jacked his price. He claimed his expenses were far higher than he had calculated."

"Did you have a written contract?" Leffing asked.

"No, just verbal," Monkhill admitted. "There wasn't much I could do. He threatened to have the whole pamphlet run destroyed unless I paid his price in full."

He got up, nervously, and paced the floor. "What really made me mad was that he lied to me about the printing cost. He said it came to nearly nine hundred dollars. I have a friend who works part-time in the printing plant. He told me the whole booklet came to just over three hundred. When I confronted Hertzell with that, he said he had other expenses in connection with research which I wouldn't understand and that he had added them to the printer's bill only to simplify things for me. I wouldn't buy that and we had quite a row. I ended up meeting his price because I wanted the pamphlet and I was afraid he might carry through his threat and destroy it if I refused to pay what he asked. But once it was delivered, I never spoke to him again."

Monkhill paused. "I suppose this makes me a suspect," he added, "if Hertzell really was murdered. But nobody around here thinks he was anyway."

His keen eyes inspected Leffing. "Have you got any real proof of murder? Anything besides the rumors spread by that crazy old-maid cousin of his?"

Leffing answered honestly. "We have scarcely any concrete evidence at all, much less proof. We are following through on every possible lead, however, slight though it may appear."

Monkhill grunted with obvious scorn. "You don't even know what killed Hertzell, if it wasn't a heart attack?"

"We don't know at this point."

Monkhill looked impatient. "If you don't know now, you'll never know." He glanced at his wristwatch. "Gentlemen, I believe I've given you enough time. You're chasing a will-o'-the-wisp. I want to get back to my hedge."

Leffing appeared thoughtful on the drive back.

"Do we have a new suspect?" I asked him.

"Possibly, Brennan. Miles Monkhill appears shrewd and resourceful. I would by no means cross him completely off our list at this stage of the investigation."

SHORTLY AFTER we arrived back at our rooms, Miss Delaporte handed Leffing a telephone

number to call. It turned out to be that of the county medical examiner.

Leffing was on the wire for twenty minutes or more. He hung up with a sigh. "Alma Camlee's been hounding Doctor Farenz—the County Medical Examiner—to hold an autopsy on the remains of Hamilton Hertzell. Of course that entails an exhumation. There are legal difficulties, obviously. I have no reasonable proof of murder and Martin Borroway, Hertzell's nearest surviving relative, is adamantly opposed to an exhumation."

"Looks like a real bind," I commented. "If Borroway's not guilty, however, why is he opposed to an exhumation and autopsy? To me, that's an indication of guilt."

"Not necessarily. Some persons oppose exhumations on aesthetic grounds. I must say," he added, "that Borroway did not strike me as that particular type."

"Nor me," I added.

The upshot of it was that we paid Martin Borroway an early evening visit. He was jumpy and irritable and giggled far less than on the previous occasion.

It soon became apparent that he was not opposed to an exhumation because of any aesthetic considerations. He believed that an exhumation, with the subsequent medical tests which this would entail, might delay the estate settlement.

Leffing assured him that the opposite was true. An examination of the cadaver, he explained, would clear the air. Death due to a heart attack would probably be confirmed; his own investigation would come to an immediate end and Borroway would quickly come into his inheritance.

Borroway appeared impressed by Leffing's argument and yet he hesitated. At length he agreed that he would consent to exhumation.

"He yielded," I said as we drove away, "only because holding out would make him a more obvious suspect than he already is."

My remark brought no reply from Leffing.

That evening we sat on Miss Delaporte's veranda until midnight. Leffing was uncertain of his next move. "I have the conviction," he told me, "that we haven't yet got under the surface of things. Matters are not as they appear to be. Hamilton Hertzell, presumably wealthy, honorable, respected, turns out to be just one notch above a common blackmailer—unless Miles Monkhill is lying. Was Hertzell merely greedy, or ac-

tually pressed for funds? To what lengths was he capable of going?"

I had no certain answers and my conjectures did not impress Leffing.

The next morning we paid an unannounced visit to the lawyer in Winsted who had acted for Hamilton Hertzell.

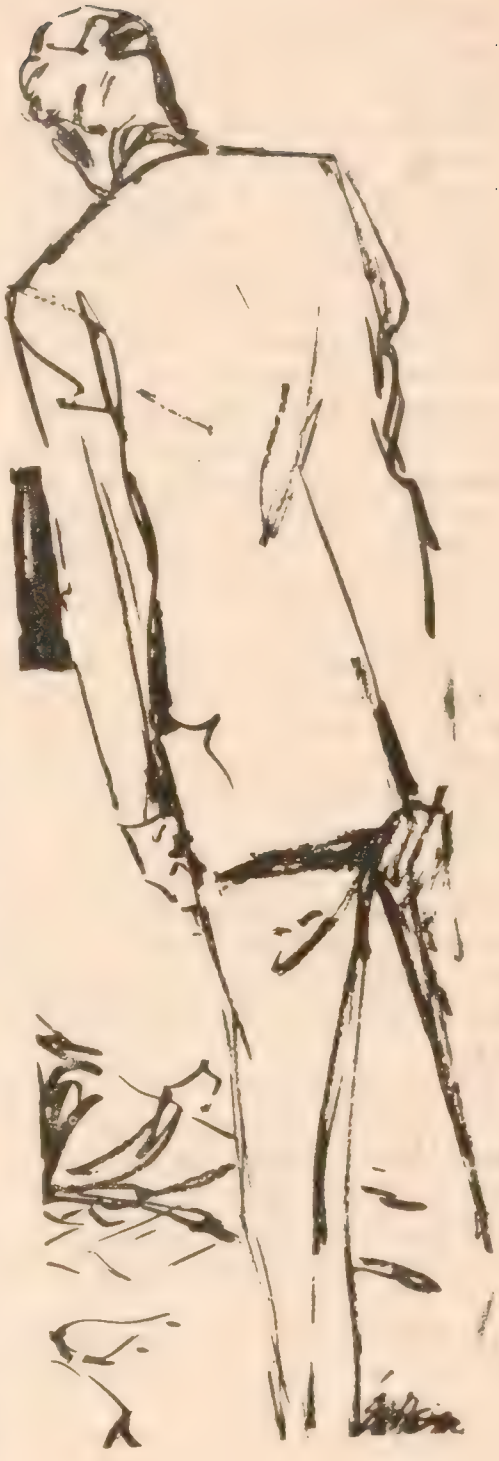
Franklin Crewe, the attorney, was obviously not happy to see us. After we had cooled our heels for an hour, we finally gained admission to his office.

Crewe was a sober young man, ramrod straight, with penetrating dark eyes and a brusk manner. He was annoyed that we had not made an appointment.

"I have some grounds for believing," Leffing told him, "that your deceased client, Hamilton Hertzell, was murdered. Were his financial affairs as stable and secure as everyone appears to believe?"

Crewe put his fingertips together and stared out of the office window for a full five minutes. We waited impatiently.

At last he made a decision. He turned to Leffing with a scowl. "I am under no obligation to answer any of your questions, as you must be perfectly aware. But I keep getting this exasperating flak from Brandlemere Falls and I feel this foolish murder myth ought



to be cleared away once and for all. At this point only the truth will serve, and the truth of the matter is that Hamilton Hertzell was very nearly bankrupt. He had gone back into the stock market, against my advice, and made many disastrous investments. When all debts, charges and fees are paid, Martin Borroway will be lucky to get a few hundred dollars. The cousin, Miss Camlee, will get only some family keepsakes of no commercial value."

"I appreciate your frankness," Leffing assured him. "Is Martin Borroway aware of the true situation?"

Crewe hesitated. "I don't know. He may be. I really can't say."

"You will not oppose an exhumation?"

Crewe shook his head. "I think it's a waste of time, but I won't oppose it. I want these murder rumors ended and the estate settled. It's a weight around my neck."

As we drove back from Winsted, we discussed the new information provided by Crewe. "In my opinion," I told Leffing, "it does not clarify matters. We don't know if Borroway knew the actual state of his uncle's finances. If he didn't, he remains a prime suspect. But even if he was aware of the facts, perhaps he killed Hertzell in the hopes of salvaging a pittance before every last penny was gone."

Leffing agreed. "You are exactly right. At this juncture, however, I feel that further probing into the motives of suspects, the identity of suspects and so forth is largely academic. We still have not one shred of evidence that murder was committed."

"You are going forward with the exhumation and autopsy?"

"I have come this far without success—there seems little more to lose. My professional reputation is at stake, but there is no help for it."

"Who will conduct the autopsy?"

"I hope that Doctor Farenz, the County Medical Examiner, will be in charge. I fear that he may be assisted by old Doctor Jenkins, and that will be unfortunate."

He shook his head. "The entire affair is quite bizarre. There has not even been a coroner's inquest. That may lead to further complications."

He had no other comments until we were approaching the outskirts of Brandlemere Falls. The he turned toward me.

"I am going to take a further gamble. As soon as we arrive back at Miss Delaporte's, I intend telephoning Doctor John Syre Worthing in New York."

"And who is Doctor John Syre Worthing?"

Leffing glanced at me with surprise and annoyance. "I assumed you were aware of his reputation. He is in this country and at this time what Sir Bernard Spilsbury was in his own day in England."

I was well acquainted with the career of Sir Bernard Spilsbury, the famous British forensic pathologist who died in the late Forties. He has been referred to as "the scalpel of Scotland Yard."

After we arrived back at Miss Delaporte's, I walked down to Poorington's store for a few items while Leffing made his telephone calls.

"What luck?" I inquired on my return.

"I had no trouble at all with Worthing," Leffing revealed, "but the deuce of a time with Doctor Farenz. He feels that Worthing, in spite of his national reputation in the field of post-mortem jurisprudence, is an outsider and an intruder. He agreed to permit him to participate in the autopsy only after hesitating, and with the greatest reluctance."

Leffing sighed with resignation. "Doctor Jenkins, at the insistence of Farenz, will also participate, but I trust that Worthing will actually take charge once things get underway. Worthing has had to cope with worse situations."

When I learned that the exhumation, the autopsy and subsequent post-mortem tests might occupy a period of weeks, I told Leffing that my own work would compel me to return to New Haven for at least a brief period. I assured him I would come back at once if the results of the autopsy appeared to warrant my return. He made no objection—although I like to think that he seemed disappointed!

NEARLY three weeks passed before the long-awaited telegram arrived. I learned later that Leffing had telephoned before sending the wire, but that I was not at home.

The telegram was the type one might expect from Leffing—terse and enigmatic:

HERTZELL MURDERED. RARE POISON. WORTHING POSITIVE. YOUR PRESENCE DESIRED IF POSSIBLE. LEFFING.

I arrived back at Brandlemere Falls in record time. Leffing seemed genuinely pleased to see me. He looked both animated and relieved; the worst worry lines had been erased from his forehead.

"I can scarcely wait to learn the details!" I told him.

"The details," he replied, after we sat down, "are intrigu-

ing. A perfunctory autopsy —such as old Doctor Jenkins might have performed on his own—would only have confirmed the supposed cause of death—a heart attack. In fact, I understand that during the preliminary stages of the autopsy, Jenkins boasted that he had been vindicated. But Doctor Worthing insisted on conducting intensive fluid and tissue tests. These tests confirmed, without question, that Hertzell was killed by batrachotoxin."

I was forced to admit that I had never heard of such a poison.

"Batrachotoxin," Leffing explained, "is obtained from the tiny kokoi frog, *Phyllobates aurotaenia*, or Colombian poison arrow frog, a denizen of the Choco area in northwest Colombia, South America. For unknown decades the native Indians have used the poison on the hunting arrows, or darts, which they insert in the tubes of their blowguns. Kokoi poison is highly lethal. An animal struck by an arrow treated with the preparation becomes paralyzed almost at once and dies very shortly."

"Incredible!" I exclaimed. "And Worthing knew all this."

"Worthing," Leffing pointed out, "has not acquired a national reputation by sitting on his hands. He keeps himself well informed. Doctor Farenz, for instance, even as you, had never heard of the kokoi frog, much less of the poison which it carries."

"I don't suppose," I smiled, "that old Jenkins had heard of it either!"

"We must not be too hard on Jenkins, in spite of his limitations," Leffing answered. "Batrachotoxin is a highly effective cardiotoxin. It interferes with conduction in the heart, brings about extrasystoles and ventricular fibrillation. It seems scarcely surprising that an elderly village doctor certified a heart attack!"

"Good heavens, Leffing! We must be dealing with an erudite murderer of extreme resourcefulness!"

"It would appear so. The background of every suspect is now under intensive scrutiny. The local authorities are of course completely out of their depths. But I have obtained a certain measure of county and state cooperation."

I shook my head. "The affair seems so extremely bizarre! Kokoi frog poison in a village in Connecticut! How was the poison pumped into poor Hertzell—by an arrow?"

Leffing inclined his head. "We believe so. You will recall the cut on Hertzell's neck—the cut which Jenkins said was

caused by a protruding rock as Hertzell dropped dead?"

"Yes, I recall several references to it."

"We think," Leffing went on, "that the poison entered Hertzell's blood stream at the site of that cut. The arrow struck him in the neck. After death, or perhaps shortly before death, the arrow was extracted and a sharp-pointed stone, carefully coated with a bit of loose soil taken from the immediate area, was jammed into the wound made by the arrow. The stone was then pulled out and tossed away. Anyone examining the neck wound with care would find bits of earth and gravel clinging to the tissues and would naturally assume that Hertzell, in falling, had struck the side of his neck against a sharp stone. The clearing in which he fell is littered with them."

"Diabolical!"

"Diabolically misleading! Well, we have finally established the fact and method of murder—thanks to Worthing. Our next task is to track down the murderer!"

"Where and how do we start?"

Leffing arose and paced the floor impatiently. "I am awaiting background reports on Miss Alma Camlee, Martin Borroway, Clement Ellison, Miles Monkhill and even Franklin Crewe, Hertzell's attorney. These reports will cover their general activities and travel itineraries—if any—over the past year or so."

"I can't imagine that you've left anyone out," I said, "unless we throw in Miss Delaporte!"

My attempt at humor was ill-timed. Leffing turned on me waspishly. "This is not the time for facetiousness! The fact of the matter is, in spite of our inclusiveness, we may have missed the actual murderer!"

We were still discussing the case, a few minutes later, when Miss Delaporte rapped on the door to summon Leffing to the telephone. He returned to our rooms with an air of excitement.

"One of our Litchfield County investigators has been doing some detailed legwork in Winsted—travel bureaus, bus and railway reservations, immunity shots for foreign travel, etc. He may have struck paydirt!"

"What did he find?"

Leffing sat down and took out a notebook. "We have the following facts. Aside from her visit to New Haven, Miss Alma Camlee, during the past year, has made only a single trip—to Boston. Clement Ellison has been to Bermuda. Miles Monkhill took a brief Caribbean

tour. Franklin Crewe had a two-week European vacation. And Martin Borroway, somewhat over fourteen months ago, visited South America —including Colombia!"

I leaped from my chair, overturning it in my excitement. "We have him then!"

Leffing held up a cautionary hand. "We may have him, but the evidence is not conclusive. And there may be more coming in."

Further evidence was not long delayed. Less than an hour later, Miss Delaporte reappeared at our rooms to inform us that we had a visitor.

A young man with a pained expression stood twisting his hat in the doorway. I recognized him as one of the town idlers I had seen lounging around Poorington's store on several occasions. He was cheaply but flashily dressed.

He introduced himself as Harry Semp.

Leffing waved him to a chair. "And how may we assist you, Mr. Semp?"

Semp looked at us with an apologetic expression. "Everything's leaked out, you know. The exhumation, autopsy—and that funny South American Indian poison!"

Leffing groaned with exasperation. "Jenkins, I'm sure. I expected as much."

Semp went on crushing his hat. "I'm Martin Borroway's friend, Mr. Leffing. I hate telling anything. But a man's been murdered—and I'm getting a little scared!"

"If you tell the simple, unvarnished truth, there's nothing in the world to be frightened about," Leffing assured him. "What information do you have concerning Martin Borroway?"

Semp took a deep breath, as if he were about to plunge into a pool. "A few weeks after he came back from his trip, Martin had me and Vanny White over to his place for drinks. He showed us some stuff he brought back. One of the things was an Indian blowgun, with little arrows to fit into it. He said the Indians killed big game with it, and that it was real dangerous."

I could feel the excitement mounting in Leffing but he gave no outward sign of it.

"Very interesting, Mr. Semp. Where did Martin Borroway keep this souvenir?"

Semp dropped his hat and picked it up. "He had got the stuff from upstairs somewhere, but it was still downstairs on a table when we left."

Leffing nodded. "I see. Is Mr. White prepared to make the same statement as you yourself have made?"

Semp shook his head emphatically. "He says he won't say a thing even if they give him the third degree! He says I'm a squealer!"

Leffing made no comment on this revelation. But as soon as Semp had been properly thanked and had left, my friend made inquiries of Miss Delaporte and we drove out to see Vanny White.

White lived with his family in a dilapidated farmhouse a short distance from the village. He was tinkering with an old car in the dooryard when we arrived. He was not a prepossessing specimen—pasty-faced, pimply and prematurally bald. He eyed us suspiciously as we approached.

As soon as he learned the purpose of our visit, he flung down his wrench and cursed in language which even in this liberated age remains largely unprintable.

"Semp squealed, just like he said he would! That dirty little—" He went on with a string of curses which might have had some clinical interest had they not quickly become so repetitious.

Leffing, however, was formidable. He waited patiently until White ran out of invective.

"Mr. White," he told him calmly but sternly, "by concealing pertinent information, you may find yourself booked as an accessory to murder. I can assure you the penalties are not light."

White's pale face grew sober. He picked up the wrench and turned toward his car. After pounding under the hood for a minute or two, he straightened up and scuffed at the dooryard dirt.

"Well, it ain't fair, the way they threaten a man. But if I got to talk—" He hesitated. "Yeah," he admitted finally, "I saw that crazy dart gun. But old Martin was just pullin' our leg. Couldn't kill nobody with that thing."

"I BELIEVE we will have no further trouble with White," Leffing volunteered, as we drove back to Miss Delaporte's. "He's all smoke and steam—an arrant coward underneath. He'll testify when the time comes."

Back in our rooms, I asked the obvious question. "When are we going to have Martin Borroway arrested for murder?"

"As soon as we can locate Chief Tolson. A call to Poorington's store should do it."

Chief Tolson arrived within ten minutes, considerably subdued and now highly deferential in his attitude toward Leffing.

After the facts were revealed to him, he nodded vigorously. "Looks like an open and shut case to me! I never did trust that fancy Mr. Borroway. Let's go!"

Borroway must have been expecting us. He was sitting on the front porch when we arrived, a packed bag at his feet. He looked ill and drawn. He could no longer manage a grin, much less a giggle.

After the usual warning statement, arrest formalities were concluded. We climbed into the car.

As we drove along, Borroway addressed Chief Tolson. "Don't go tearing my place apart looking for that Indian blowgun. It's not there."

"Where'd you hide it?" Tolson asked.

Borroway was silent for some time. At length he looked out the car window. "I—burned it on a brush pile."

Tolson grunted contemptuously. "Thought you'd come up with something better than that!"

It was immediately apparent that Borroway would be unable to raise even a fraction of the bail which would be necessary to keep him out of jail. Since Brandlemere Falls had no lockup, he was taken to a detention center in Winsted.

"I guess that wraps it up," I commented later when we were settled back in our rooms.

"I am not so—" Leffing started to say when there was another rap at the door. Miss Delaporte handed Leffing a slip of paper.

As he read the message, a curious expression flashed across Leffing's face. He handed me the slip without a word.

It was a cablegram from London: TIMOTHY CURLANE FLOGGED THROUGH STREETS OF LONDON. HANGED AS COMMON THIEF AT TYBURN 1598. HERTZELL INFORMED.

I passed it back to Leffing. "It has absolutely no meaning to me. Who in blazes was Timothy Curlane?"

"I believe I know who he was," Leffing replied. "However—"

Miss Delaporte suddenly reappeared. "Telephone, Mr. Leffing," she announced wearily.

I was still mulling over the cablegram when Leffing returned.

"That was Borroway. They let him telephone me from Winsted. He now tells me that he didn't burn the blowgun after all—he gave it to Clement Ellison."

I was not impressed. "He's beginning to twist on the hook. He realized his brush-fire story would get him nowhere. Now

he's trying to implicate someone else in an attempt to save his own hide. I wouldn't buy it, Leffing."

Leffing tucked the cablegram in his pocket. "Well, it can do no harm to doublecheck. Suppose we run out and ask Ellison, just for the record?"

As we were driving along the blacktop highway which passed Ellison's private entrance road, Leffing touched my arm. "I believe you've missed Ellison's place. This part of the highway does not look familiar."

"Sorry, I didn't see that infernal name sign."

I turned the car around and we started back, driving slowly. Within minutes we found the road. I looked for the name sign in vain.

"No wonder!" I exclaimed. "The sign's missing!"

"Interesting," Leffing commented.

Ellison appeared startled to see us, but he invited us inside cordially enough.

Once we were seated again in the bulky armchairs in his comfortable study, Leffing brought him up to date on developments.

When Leffing revealed that Martin Borroway had telephoned from jail in Winsted to tell him that he had given the dart gun to Ellison, our host leaned forward in his chair. It may have been my imagination, but I thought his florid face grew a trifle pale.

"That's ridiculous!" he asserted. "He's desperate—trying to fabricate some kind of far-fetched alibi!"

"It may be," Leffing agreed. "However, we are required to run a routine check on such statements."

Ellison leaned back in his chair, looking relieved. He shook his head in apparent disbelief.

"A real scamp—but I never thought he'd go so far!"

"Mr. Ellison," Leffing continued, "I have a few other questions. Why did you remove the name sign from your roadway entrance?"

Ellison seemed about to burst out with an oath. He checked himself and instead smiled apologetically. "Sorry if you missed the drive. Oh, the sign was poorly painted, you know. Looked pretty sloppy. I thought I'd have a new one made up."

"During your absence one day last week," Leffing went on, "I had the local hack drop me off in this area. I inspected your signpost with the aid of a powerful magnifying glass which I always bring on these little investigations. Tell me, Mr. Ellison, why did you have your full middle name, 'Curlane'—which originally ap-

peared on the sign—painted out? Why did you change it to a simple 'C'?!"

Ellison's temper finally overcame his better judgement. "What the devil do you mean? What business is it of yours?"

Leffing's grey-blue eyes remained expressionless. "It is my business because I am investigating a murder."

Their eyes locked but Ellison had no reply.

Without a word, Leffing took the cablegram from his pocket and handed it to our host.

Ellison snatched it. As he read, his face turned white.

At length his hand dropped. The cablegram fluttered to the floor. He smiled, but never in my life have I seen more malice in a smile. "You are a meddler, aren't you?"

"It is my job to meddle."

"Well, I don't think you're going to meddle much more!" Ellison replied savagely.

His next movement was a blur of motion; he acted with the speed of a striking adder.

Twisting around, he grabbed something from a low table lying almost out of sight behind his chair. A long wooden tube appeared at his mouth and his cheeks puffed out.

Leffing flung himself toward the floor. I heard the *chunk* of the tiny arrow as it buried itself in the leather armchair.

An instant later Leffing had knocked the blowgun aside. As he hurled himself on Ellison, the impact toppled Ellison's chair. In another moment both men were rolling and threshing together on the floor, Ellison's curses interspersed with occasional grunts.

Springing up, I circled the two struggling men, but it seemed impossible to interfere. I could see that Ellison was jabbing his thumbs toward Leffing's eyes. Holding his head high and as far back as he could, Leffing pounded his adversary's face with what looked to me like sledgehammer blows.

I picked up a heavy glass ashtray, intending to break it on Ellison's skull, but I soon saw that my help would not be needed. Ellison, purple of face now, began to breathe with difficulty. He continued to struggle, however.

Suddenly Leffing lifted his opponent's head in both hands and smashed it back against the oak floor. Ellison's arms fell back. He lay limp.

Leffing got up, breathing heavily. His face was bleeding and one of his eyes looked bloodshot.

"Are you hurt?" I asked anxiously. "Your eyes—?"

"No—permanent damage—I trust."

After wiping his face with a handkerchief and partially regaining his breath, he bent over Ellison, unbuckled the unconscious man's belt and pulled it off. In another minute Ellison's hands were securely strapped behind his back.

Leffing straightened up and looked around the room. "Brennan, pull the cord off one of those venetian blinds. He may come out of this completely subdued—or like a maniac. Impossible to tell."

After tying Ellison's feet with the cord, we set his chair upright and dropped him back into it.

I telephoned for Chief Tolson.

As Ellison wavered back to consciousness, we examined the arrow which had been intended for Leffing. It was buried a full two inches in the hard leather armchair.

It was soon removed.

Leffing surveyed it grimly. "By now I'd be paralyzed, if not already dead. I should have been more careful!"

About the time Ellison regained his senses, someone was pounding on the front door.

An astonished Chief Tolson entered the room. Succinctly, Leffing told him what had happened.

"You mean Borroway didn't kill Hertzell? Mr. Ellison is the murderer?"

"It would certainly appear so; Chief!"

Ellison had not revived with a renewal of manic fury. He seemed stunned and broken. We got him into Tolson's car and followed the Chief in our own back to Brandlemere Falls.

In spite of Ellison's apparent docility, Tolson took no chances. He hastily deputized three villagers to accompany him before he started out for Winsted with his prisoner.

AT MISS DELAPORTE'S, Leffing examined his eye and pronounced it in good condition. It might remain bloodshot for a few days, he told me, but he was sure there would be no permanent damage.

"His thumb nail just cut the corner a bit!" he commented wryly.

After showers, a change of clothes and a light dinner, we returned to our rooms.

Leffing settled back into a rocker and regarded me; the trace of a crooked grin showed on his angular face. "I suppose you have a few questions you'd like to ask?"

"A few questions! I'm a walking quiz program!"

He laughed. "Well, perhaps I have been a trifle cryptic!"

"How on earth did you get on Ellison's track?" I asked. "And what was the significance of

that cablegram? I'm still very much in the dark."

"My curiosity, as I might call it, concerning Clement Ellison, started off with a very minor observation. You may recall that the first time we visited him I made some comment on the atrociously painted name sign?"

"Yes, you mentioned how bad the printing was."

"The sign, of itself, smeared, crudely painted though it was, might have been dismissed from my mind—except for one thing. As we drove up to Ellison's house, I was impressed by the neatness of everything else—the meticulously-trimmed shrubbery, the gleaming lawns, the carefully-tended trees. Against this background, the sign certainly seemed incongruous!"

"I hadn't thought of it that way," I admitted, "but I certainly agree—now that you point it out!"

"After our interview with Miles Monkhill," Leffing continued, "I became increasingly uneasy. Hertzell, I concluded, was both unscrupulous and pressed for funds. The combination could be dangerous. And Ellison was his neighbor. If Monkhill was not the murderer—and I didn't rule this out—was it possible, I asked myself, that Hertzell and Ellison had had a row? There was no report of it, but I kept turning possibilities over in my mind."

He paused. "Then I had—well, I suppose writers would call it an inspiration! I began speculating about the reason for Hertzell's trip to Titusville. As I reviewed our own visit to that town, I recalled some of the names we had seen in the local cemetery: Searle, Gower, Bates, Holborn, Rangloft, Curlane, etc. When I came to the name 'Curlane', I recalled Ellison's smeared sign and the middle initial 'C'. It was an awfully long shot, as the saying goes, but I was, at that point, literally desperate. If Hertzell had done genealogical work for Monkhill, might he not have done some as well for Ellison?"

Leffing leaned forward. "Miss Delaporte had informed me that Ellison customarily did his week's shopping in Winsted on Wednesdays. The Wednesday following my little cerebral cogitations—you had gone back to New Haven—I hired the town hack and was driven out to a place on the main road near Hertzell's private drive. I told the hack to return in half an hour. With a powerful magnifying glass I examined Ellison's name sign. Barely visible underneath thinly-applied paint was the stenciled middle

name, 'Curlane'. Ellison had simply painted over it and then substituted the initial for the name. I felt at once that I might be on the correct track."

He got up and paced the room restlessly. "Of course I was taking chances and gambling against time. But I felt I had no choice. I am personally acquainted with New England's foremost genealogist, who lives in Boston, and I know the names of several others. I got on the telephone. Within a week, information was relayed back to me which made it apparent that Hertzell had done extensive genealogical research on two names—Ellison and Curlane. 'Curlane', I quickly learned, had been Ellison's mother's maiden name. Hertzell had done what research he could in the local area—as for instance, Titusville—but then he had called on his fellow genealogists for help. He amassed a great deal of information. Finally the ancestral trail led to London."

Leffing shook his head. "One fact unearthed by genealogical experts in England doomed Hertzell. When he learned this fact, of course, he thought of it only as the key to a golden door of opportunity. The fact I refer to, as you no doubt have already guessed, was contained in the cablegram which I showed you. One of Ellison's maternal ancestors, Timothy Curlane, had been convicted of 'high theft' in London in 1598. After being flogged in the streets, he was hanged at Tyburn.

"Hertzell saw his chance. He knew Ellison took great pride in his ancestry and was hoping that Hertzell would discover some one of royal blood on the family tree. Instead, Hertzell came up with a common thief, executed at Tyburn!

"We have yet to learn the details, but, presumably, the blackmail began. Ellison undoubtedly wanted Timothy Curlane's existence scrubbed from the record. Hertzell, I am sure, refused to do any scrubbing until Ellison paid him off."

Leffing frowned. "You know how I despise blackmailers. I am not really sorry that Hertzell was murdered and I have some sympathy for Ellison —even if he did try to kill me!

"I suppose the age-old pattern was repeated. One payoff was followed by a request for a second and so on. A blackmailer rarely quits until his victim is bled white. Ellison, however, was hot-tempered and impulsive. Borroway's gift of the Indian blowgun may have put the idea of murder into his mind. Or perhaps it was there already and the deadly dart

gun merely provided him with a convenient means of carrying out a deed which he had already determined to perform."

"A harrowing business," I said, "but there still remain so many unanswered questions. For instance, why did Borroway give Ellison the blowgun in the first place?"

Leffing shrugged. "You will recall Ellison's study walls? Target pistols. An antique fowling piece. Probably Borroway thought Ellison would treasure the dart gun as a souvenir to be displayed. I imagine he valued Ellison's friendship. Quite probably Ellison had lent him money on occasion. Or perhaps he felt that Ellison might do him some favors in the future."

"Why didn't Borroway tell the truth in the beginning? Why that fabrication about burning the blowgun on a brush pile?"

Leffing sat down and linked his hands behind his head. "For all his flippancy and brittle wit, Borroway is really not too intelligent. I doubt that he fully understood the position he was in until he found himself incarcerated in a sturdy stone cell. Beyond that, I suppose he was reluctant to have it known that his uncle was a blackmailer. Who knows? He may even have had some foolish but still laudable feeling of loyalty toward Ellison. Perhaps he was not convinced that Ellison killed Hertzell, in spite of the irrefutable autopsy evidence."

"That sounds convincing," I admitted.

"One fact I haven't mentioned," Leffing went on, "was that during your interval back in New Haven, I persuaded Chief Tolson—with great difficulty, I must admit—to let me inspect the Hertzell premises. I concentrated on the study where he kept his files. There were 'raw' files on the Monkhill genealogy and on several others—but none at all on Ellison. This only increased my suspicions. I believe now that, after killing Hertzell, Ellison removed the file folder containing the damning information about his ancestor. So far as we can ascertain, the actual book, or pamphlet, has never been printed. Ellison would certainly want the printing delayed until all references to Timothy Curlane were deleted. And, presumably, Hertzell refused to delete—or promised to delete only after yet one more blackmail payment."

FOLLOWING our return to New Haven, we learned that after intensive questioning, Clement Ellison had finally "broken down" and dictated a complete confession.

Leffing's description of the crime, as outlined to me, was wholly sustained by Hertzell's admissions.

Upon learning that his mother's ancestor, Timothy Curlane, had been hanged at Tyburn, he had asked Hertzell to omit all references to the unfortunate man in the projected genealogy. Hertzell had refused. Ellison had then offered him a thousand dollars, over and above the agreed price for the research and printing, if he would "forget" Timothy Curlane's past existence. Hertzell accepted the offer—and the money—but a month later demanded an additional five thousand dollars.

Ellison, playing for time, gave him eight hundred, promising more later when he had an opportunity to convert some securities into cash. Hertzell, he said, may not have planned to print the pamphlet at all. But Hertzell assured him that, unless he "paid up", the facts concerning Timothy Curlane would be disseminated "far and wide", whether or not the pamphlet ever appeared. And Hertzell's relationship to the executed man would be underscored.

Ellison knew the nature of blackmail. He decided to kill Hertzell. He could envisage, he admitted, no alternative. Borroway's blowgun gift gave him, he thought, the perfect weapon. He did research on the weapon and learned that some of the effects of the poison, batrachotoxin, resembled those caused by a heart attack. He was elated.

He knew Hertzell's habits. One afternoon, when Hertzell took his customary walk around the back pastures, Ellison slipped through the fence dividing the two properties, hid in thick brush near a clearing and waited. Luck was with him. Hertzell crossed directly through the clearing and was actually only a few feet away when the arrow flashed out of the bushes and buried itself in his neck.

According to Ellison, he collapsed almost immediately, became convulsed and quickly sank into a state of unconsciousness. Ellison waited briefly, pulled out the arrow, pocketed it, and jammed a sharp stone smeared with dirt into the neck wound. He then hurled the stone into thick bushes. Taking Hertzell's keys, he hurried to his victim's house and extracted the Ellison-Curlane folder from Hertzell's file.

By the time he got back to replace the keys, Hertzell was dead. He scurried off through the brush, slipped over the

sence and returned home without being seen.

After Leffing told me details of the confession, I still had a few questions. "Why didn't Ellison get rid of the blowgun once the murder was committed?"

"Murderers," Leffing reminded me, "are notoriously vain and arrogant. Ellison thought he had perpetrated a perfect crime. Even after the autopsy, apparently, he thought he was safe. Or perhaps he decided that if he kept the blowgun, this fact in itself would indicate his innocence. Would a guilty man, he may have asked himself, keep the murder weapon? The answer is obvious."

This reply did not entirely satisfy me, but I could offer no better explanation.

"Just one more question," I said. "Borroway brought the blowgun back from Colombia well over a year ago. How could Ellison be sure the poison arrows were still potent enough to kill?"

"A good question, but easily answered. An arrow impregnated with batrachotoxin remains highly lethal for as long as fifteen years! Ellison's research must have revealed this fact."

"If he hadn't tried to kill you," I mused, "he might have bluffed his way through the business."

"His attempt on my life," Leffing replied, "tipped his hand irrevocably of course. It was a desperate, impulsive act, typical of the man's nature. But I doubt that he would have persuaded me of his innocence, even had he not tried a second murder."

My friend walked to the sideboard and brought out two brandy glasses.

"And now," he said, filling the glasses, "I propose a toast—to Miss Alma Camlee!"

"I don't know that she deserves one," I answered, accepting a glass. "After all, she picked the wrong suspect from the first."

Leffing lifted his glass. "She did indeed. But at least she started us off on the quest! What else matters, Brennan?"

At that moment it seemed as if nothing else did matter. We touched glasses and drank.

Coming Soon: Another LUCIUS LEFFING Story

PIG IN A POKE

He could outsmart Lucy, and Lucy had outsmarted the boss, but what would he be gaining?

by

RICHARD O. LEWIS

THE BANK JOB went off just the way Porky had planned it. Lucy and I strolled down the almost deserted main street of the little town that Friday morning, timing ourselves to be at the front door of the branch bank precisely when the two bank employees—a husband and wife team—arrived to open up.

"Just keep calm," I warned them, kicking the door shut after we had entered, "and maybe nobody'll get hurt."

At sight of my gun, the manager, a thin-faced, anemic fel-

low, got a bad case of the shakes.

His wife was a more stalwart, out-going type. She opened her trap and began to mouth off.

The tall, angular Lucy is not the kind of person to take lip from anyone. A fanatical light leaped into her dark eyes as she raised the barrel of her gun a foot or two above the woman's head and said in a gravelly voice:

"Shattup!"

After that, things went along quite smoothly. It took the jittery little man only a few minutes to unlock the back door for our escape route and then to open the safe and transfer its emergency contents to the canvas bag I was obligingly holding open.

We gagged them, tied them to a couple of chairs, and got to the back door just as Porky, right on schedule, drove up in the station wagon. Less than five minutes later, we were on the main highway heading leisurely toward Lake City. Lucy had taken off her bronze wig, and I had removed my black hat and beard.

"How'd it go?" Porky wanted to know.

"Just the way you planned it," said Lucy.

Porky grunted an egotistical noise. "Leave it to Jackie Boy," he said. "He don't make mistakes."

He always referred to himself as Jackie Boy. His real name—or the one he went by—was Jack Boyd. I preferred to call him Porky. The name suited him better. He was more like a pig than even a pig should be. A fat, greedy, uncouth, self-worshiping slob. And I hated every one of his four hundred pounds. Naturally, I didn't call him Porky to his face.

This was the third job we had pulled in less than a year, and on the previous two he had taken the lion's share of the haul for himself. I was determined this time to get my own just share of the loot—and maybe more. There would be a showdown, of course, and it might get a little rough. But I didn't care. I was fed up with being treated like dirt in the bottom of a pig sty. My suitcase was already packed and waiting at my rooming house, and before this day was over I would part company with Porky and Lucy for all time and be on my way to parts unknown.

We stopped in Lake City long enough for Lucy to buy two huge bags of groceries and cram them into the back seat with me. After she had squeezed herself into the front

seat again, we headed north on a graveled road that led to a strip of lake shore where Porky had rented a cabin for the summer, posing as an insurance salesman.

In fact, he had the word INSURANCE painted on both sides of the station wagon. It was a good cover up. People were so accustomed to seeing the car being driven about the area day after day that no one would give a second thought to the fact that it was in town on the morning of the bank robbery.

The cabin, quite similar to a dozen others scattered about among the trees, sat back a hundred yards or so from the lake shore. Porky parked the car in the driveway alongside Lucy's blue sedan, and the springs rose a full six inches as he grunted himself out of the front seat to go waddling up the path, leaving Lucy and me to carry the groceries and the canvas bag that was heavy with both paper currency and rolled coins.

Porky fumbled and wheezed and snorted and finally got the door of the cabin open. A glance showed me that a special lock had been put on the door quite recently, and I wondered if Porky might have installed that lock himself. There was a good possibility that he had a sizable share of the two previous jobs stashed away somewhere inside.

I had never been in the cabin before. It consisted of a large kitchen-livingroom setup with two doors opening off into what I presumed to be bedrooms.

It became immediately obvious that Lucy was quite familiar with the place. After placing an opened can of beer on the table in front of Porky, she turned on the electric range and brought forth a couple of frying pans, a carving knife, and a cutting board. Then she unearthed eggs, tomatoes, a couple loaves of bread, and a ponderous ham from among the groceries.

After wrestling the ham from its cellophane bag upon which I caught the words PREMIUM HAM—nothing but the best for Porky, of course!—she began carving off thick slabs.

Porky finished off his can of beer in a couple more gulps, trickling only a small portion of it down over his chins, and Lucy wheeled promptly to get him another one. How she could fawn over an animal-like creature that way was quite beyond me.

Although she had a small apartment in Lake City, I felt certain that she had been spending a lot of her time at the cabin, catering to Porky's

sadistic desires. I had seen her a couple of times with swollen face and blackened eyes. The whole setup was sickening.

I hoisted the heavy canvas bag to the table, sat down, and began opening it.

"Let it alone," Porky growled, his porcine eyes narrowing over his half-raised can of beer. "We'll count it after I've had something to eat."

"We'll count it now," I said, fumbling with the draw cords. "After which, I'll take a full third of the haul and be on my way for good!"

"You'll take the share agreed upon!" he wheezed, foam spilling from the corners of his mouth. "A fourth for you, a fourth for Lucy, and the rest for me! Or you'll take nothing at all!"

I half arose from my chair and glared down at him. I was tempted to draw my gun, demand the keys to the station wagon, pick up the bag, and lam out.

But I quickly realized that it wouldn't work out. He would go to any length to stop me. If I took a car, he would call the police immediately, accuse me of car theft, and I'd be picked up in less than thirty minutes, hot money and all.

I could tie them up, I thought. *Give myself time to make a run for it.*

That idea was no good, either. Too risky. Porky had pushed his paunch a foot back from the table, his right hand dangling near the coat pocket where he usually carried a gun. Lucy had quit slicing ham and had come to stand beside him, a savage, dangerous glint in her dark eyes, the long carving knife in hand.

I knew now that the only way I could make off with that bag of money was by killing both of them. I could out draw Porky—maybe. But a snub-nosed .38 in a closed room makes a bang quite similar to that of a small cannon, and the area was alive with campers who would instantly come nosing around from all directions.

Porky had suddenly thrown back his head, opened his cavernous mouth, and let out a derisive guffaw that nettled me to the point of wanting to ram a beer can down his throat. He knew he had me stymied—at least for the moment—and it pleased his grotesque egoism to let me know that he knew it, to put me in my place.

"Get the satchel from the bedroom," he directed Lucy, after he had had his fun and had again directed his attention to his beer.

She put down the knife, went into one of the rooms, and returned with an old-fashioned

leather valise. After she had emptied the contents of the bag into it, Porky picked up the empty bag and tossed it at me.

"Burn this in the incinerator," he said. "Somebody has probably got into the bank by now and found out what happened. Then get lost until I've had something to eat."

My anger was at the boiling point, and the pressure was steadily rising, but I finally succeeded in clamping the lid on my emotions sufficiently to pick up the bag and start toward the door. By that time, Lucy had placed another can of beer on the table.

Stupidity was the only explanation for her brainless devotion.

I set fire to the mess of paper in the incinerator and tossed the bag on top. Then I walked down the path and out onto the little landing pier that stretched out a few yards into the clear water of the lake. Although I had exerted a great amount of control over my anger, I was still seething inside.

Those two back in the cabin were probably delving into the valise right now, picking out a few thousand apiece, playing me for a sucker. My share of whatever was left wouldn't be enough to sustain me for long. I needed it all. And I intended to get it, along with any other funds Porky might have hidden away in the cabin.

I gazed out across the shimmering lake. It was wide and deep, deep enough to hide a couple of bodies for all time. And a small motorboat nodded and bumped invitingly at its moorings.

Besides finding a quiet way of dispatching the two of them, there were other problems. How could I possibly drag Porky's lifeless hulk down the path to the pier and get it into a boat? And even if I succeeded in that gigantic task, where in the area would I find enough iron to sink him?

Perhaps I could con the two of them into taking a cruise with me, upset them in the middle of the lake, swim away, and make the whole thing look accidental. No good. Finding himself in the water, Porky would merely turn over on his back and float safely to shore on his own blubber.

I strolled back to shore, finally, and sat down on a bench beneath a shade tree. I was hungry, but I certainly was not going back to the cabin as long as Porky was at the table. I had watched his eating habits only once, and that had been enough to shake my stomach for a long while. I tried not to imagine what he was doing

now with plates of ham and eggs and sliced tomatoes, washing the whole mess down his gullet with slobbering gulps of beer.

Slow minutes dragged by as I sat there, trying to think up ways and means of getting rid of the two of them. Then it suddenly occurred to me that, at this very moment, the two of them might be thinking up ways and means of getting rid of *me*!

The thought shook me.

More for reassurance than anything else, I pulled the gun from my jacket pocket, checked the load, and spun the cylinder. It seemed to be in perfect working order. I was about to return it to my pocket when I heard the sound of steps on the path directly behind me.

I wheeled around, gun ready. It was Lucy. She was staggering slowly toward me, one hand held over the left side of her face. I hadn't heard her come out of the cabin.

I slid the gun back into my pocket and made room for her on the bench. She took her hand away from her face to expose a bruised cheek and a red, watery eye. It was obvious that Porky had once more been satisfying his gluttonous and sadistic desires.

"He's filth!" I said, shaking my head from side to side. "I

can't understand what you see in him!"

"I see only one thing in him," she said. "The same thing you see. Money!"

"But I thought that you were—well. . ."

"In love with him. Right? Well, that's what I wanted him to think, too. But that's all over now."

"You mean you're walking out?" I asked, skeptically.

She turned to face me squarely, and I saw the same wild, maniacal light in her eyes that I had noted on some previous occasions. "Yes, I'm walking out! I know now where he keeps his money hidden! And when I walk out, I'm taking it all with me!"

"And why are you telling me about it?" I wanted to know.

"I'm just being practical. When you faced up to him back in the cabin, I had the definite feeling that you were planning to take the money for yourself, even if you had to—to get rid of both of us in—in some way. I've worked too hard and put up with too much to have that happen! That money is the only chance I have or ever will have of getting ahead in this world!" She paused to pass the back of her hand over her watery eye. "And there's enough there for the two of us," she added.

So that was it. She would settle for half a loaf rather than risk being erased from the picture entirely.

"And just how are you going to go about it?"

"He's asleep now. Or will be in a few minutes. And once he starts his nap, he'll be out for at least two hours—as dead as a fat hog in a wallow. After I get the money, we'll simply drive my car into town, ditch it, catch the first plane out, and be a couple hundred miles away before he wakes up and finds out what happened."

It sounded logical. It was just possible that her fawning and groveling was at last paying off. The egotistical Porky probably believed that she was so infatuated with his wonderous charms that she couldn't live without him.

She got up from the bench and wiped moisture from her eye again. "It will take awhile," she said. "When I'm certain he's asleep, I'll change into traveling clothes, pick up my personal belongings and the money, and be ready to go."

I smiled as I watched her walk determinedly up the path. The odds were beginning to shift in my direction. With only Lucy to deal with, I felt quite certain that the entire haul would eventually end up in my possession.

I moseyed up the path, presently, jerked a few wires loose in Porky's station wagon, got into Lucy's sedan and waited.

As the minutes dragged by, I became a bit skeptical. Maybe the two of them were cooking up something, planning ways and means of getting rid of me. I was just reaching for my gun when Lucy suddenly emerged from the cabin, face flushed with excitement, bad eye flaming. She had changed from dress and apron into slacks and blouse. She had her purse and over-night bag in one hand and was lugging the valise with the other.

Less than fifteen minutes later, after stopping at my rooming house for my lone suitcase, we walked into the

airport just as an incoming flight arrived and began disgorging passengers.

A glance at the posted schedule showed that the next flight out would be in less than an hour, a flight directly into Los Angeles. Things would work out quite nicely—provided Porky didn't awaken prematurely back at the cabin and do something to foul us up.

"You get the tickets," said Lucy, putting the valise down beside my suitcase, "while I make a quick trip to pick up my things at the apartment. I'll be back in no time at all."

I fought a smile back from my lips. With Lucy gone, all I had to do was to pick up my suitcase and the valise. . .

"In the meantime," she added, "we'll just put the stuff into a locker where it'll be safe until I return."

Obviously, her trust in me was quite nil.

I put coins into two lockers, stowed my suitcase in one and the valise in the other.

"Fine," said Lucy, holding out her hand. I dropped a key into her palm, and she hurried off.

Then I let the smile come to my lips. Lucy had the key to the locker that contained my suitcase. She had fallen for the old gypsy switch just the way I had hoped she would, and by the time she got back from the apartment, I'd be long gone. All I had to do now was get the valise, walk out, steal the first available car I came to, and be on my way.

I wheeled toward the locker, and it was then that I saw the sign over a small desk to my right.

RENT-A-CAR.

There was the ideal solution! In a rented car, I could take off in any direction I chose without fear of being picked up for car theft!

It took but a minute or two to explain to the pert brunette behind the desk that I had just arrived in town, had reserved a cabin on the lake for a week, and needed a car for transportation and sight seeing. She accepted my fake credentials and credit card, gave me a contract to sign, used the telephone, and then smiled up at me. "Your car will be here right away, sir," she said, brightly. "In just a few short minutes."

I got the valise from the locker and took a seat near the desk.

After a dozen or so slow minutes had ticked by, I began to get jittery. Maybe I had made a mistake by trying to rent a car. If Lucy should return and find me sitting here. . .

At that moment, a young man with a key chain dangling

from a finger hurried up to the brunette and was motioned in my direction. With a quick sigh of relief, I leaped to my feet and picked up the valise—and it was then that two other men suddenly appeared at my side, seemingly out of nowhere. One of them laid a hand on my arm. "One moment, please," he said.

The other one flipped an ID card at me. "City police. We have a warrent to search your luggage."

I could have dropped through the floor. "There—there must be some mistake," I stammered. "I just arrived here, officer, and. . ."

"We received an anonymous call," said the taller of the two. "It may have been just another crank call. We get a lot of them. But, of course, we've got to check—just in case. . ." He took the bag from my nerveless fingers.

So Porky had awakened early from his nap, had discovered what had happened, and had given the police a make on Lucy and me. The entire force had probably been combing the area for us!

The officer opened the bag, peered inside, shook his head slowly from side to side, and handed the valise to his partner.

"That money is mine!" I said. "My personal property! It's my entire life's savings. . ."

I stopped short as the officer tilted the bag in my direction. Even though my knees suddenly buckled beneath me, my mind was still able to put some of the pieces together.

Yes, Lucy was as hard as nails, all right. But she certainly wasn't stupid. It was obvious now that the over-night bag she had brought from the cabin had been stuffed with all the paper currency she could lay her hands on.

Now, after placing the call to the police, she was miles away in her car or a stolen one, her wild eyes filled with a maniacal glint of triumph. And I was in no position to send the police after her or to give chase myself—*ever*.

And neither was Porky.

She had settled all scores and had tied up all the loose ends quite neatly. In fact, before placing Porky's head into the valise, she had tied it up quite neatly in a cellophane bag. And in the bag, printed in bold letters of blue, were the words PREMIUM HAM.

A PLAIN CASE OF MURDER

by KEITH AYLING

No woman lives forever. But this one had everything going for her—fame, incredible wealth, the vestige of great beauty. So—why did she blow her head off?

LIEUTENANT Bill Faraday cocked a sandy eyebrow at young Sergeant Traylor, his assistant on homicide. "Looks to me like a straight case of suicide, Ken," he said. "From all accounts the poor old gal was going off her rocker. It doesn't make sense giving all her money away like she was."

"Okay, Chief." Ken Traylor's voice was edged with disappointment. "You're the boss here, but I have a couple of ideas that make sense to me, too—quite a few as a matter of fact." He slid his brawny six-foot-two off the edge of Faraday's desk and walked heavily to the door.

Bill Faraday called after him, "Tell you what, Ken." He smiled as Traylor turned to him. "I'll give you five more days on this case. Things are slack round here." He winked at the other's suddenly happy face. "And I'll bet you a box of good cigars on the side that it's suicide. That'll cost you just fifteen bucks. Yeah?"

Traylor nodded. "I'll take cash. Thanks, Bill."

Upstairs, Traylor scanned the reports on the death of Lillian Rouse, retired musical comedy star. Doc Margetson, the aging physician who was part time police surgeon, had written the case down as death by shooting, self-inflicted. Death had occurred at approximately midnight. The body was discovered at 9:15 the following morning by Viola Lakin, the dead woman's secretary who lived in.

Albert Grimes, the gardener,

occupied the lodge in the grounds. There was a deposition, with an alibi, by Miles Moon, Miss Rouse's second husband. Moon lived in a hotel in town. Although the couple were separated, he was a regular visitor. No notes were left, and there was no obvious reason for suicide.

Ken Traylor rubbed the side of his long straight nose thoughtfully. The dead woman had a gun permit. She was also known to be mildly eccentric.

As he drove the new squad coupe along the pleasant flowered suburban road to *My Vista*, the sprawling Spanish type house where the dead woman lay, Traylor reflected how lucky he was to have a chief like Bill Faraday. Bill was always ready to give him a chance. Some of the oldtimers were the reverse.

Traylor was thoughtful again. This might be just a routine case. So he might be out fifteen bucks! But you could never be sure. That was a thumb rule for him. It had paid off years before when he was with the CID boys in Germany.

He tried to remember everything he knew or had read about Miles Moon. Moon was the athletic type, but kind of a fop. A little too tanned, too lean, too well dressed. Gossip said he was making the running with Sylvia Brown, niece of Nick Brown, retired State Senator.

'Notebook Nick', as Brown was called, had ruled the entire county by strongarm methods in the past. He was out of office now. The fabulous Brown political machine was disorganized, but Brown with his hoodlums in waiting was still a power to be reckoned with. Sylvia, his niece, was in her twenties and lovely.

A few miles further along the road, Traylor remembered something else about Moon. He was very close to Senator Brown. But that was understandable, seeing that Lillian Rouse and Brown were prominent on most every charity committee in the county.

Viola Lakin, the tall redheaded secretary, greeted Traylor on the geranium hung porch of the house. Her large brown eyes gave him a friendly but impersonal scrutiny. Subconsciously Traylor tagged her; a plain Jane with curves, and legs to remember. Her waist was arrestingly slim.

"I have phoned Mr. Brake, Miss Rouse's attorney," Viola Lakin said. "And here's an inventory of the entire place, a list of the help. All sleep out except myself."

Ken Traylor glanced at the inventory, and the names,

nodded to the state trooper on guard.

"I'll take a look around," he said to Viola Lakin before going up the short flight of stairs to the death room.

He was inspecting the small heavily clotted wound on the underside of the dead woman's chin, when he was aware the secretary had followed him in. Her hands folded across her waist, she was looking down at the corpse, her eyes wide behind the steel rimmed bifocals.

"Such a terrible end for such a sweet person," she remarked in a low muted tone. "I can't think why she did it."

Ken Traylor replaced the sheet. "You were rather close to her, I imagine, Miss Lakin." He watched her face.

"We were almost like sisters. She was much older than I am, of course, but she had such a youthful spirit."

Traylor walked over to the casement window. Below, the shaven lawn shimmered emerald green in the late afternoon sunshine. It had rained during the night.

"Is this the window you entered by?" he asked.

She came to his side quickly. "Yes, I used the small metal stepladder in the garage. Miss Rouse always bolted her bedroom door, but she insisted on leaving her window open."

"Was she frightened of anything?"

"I don't think so. She acquired the habit of locking her door after years of sleeping in hotel rooms when she was on tour."

Ken Traylor was absorbed in the close-cropped lawn. "You didn't hear the shot?"

"No. My rooms are at the far northeast of the house. I sleep soundly. I had an appointment downtown after dinner. When I came home around 10:30 the house was in darkness. I presumed Miss Rouse was asleep and went straight to bed. In the morning, when she didn't answer my knock, I went into her room by the window. I always do that when I have difficulty in waking her. She took sleeping pills, because she was such a terribly light sleeper."

"Who was your date with?"

She hesitated. "Do I have to tell you? You see—" she smiled. "The person I had a date with, stood me up. So I had dinner alone, and took in a movie, and then came home by the bus."

"Who was it who failed to keep the appointment, Miss Lakin?" Traylor persisted.

Her brown eyes met his steadily. "Miles Moon," she said steadily. "We often dined together on my night off. Just socially, of course. The poor chap is pathetically lonely."

Traylor glanced around the room. "So Miss Rouse was alone here from eight in the evening until 10:30."

She nodded.

"Did people ever drop in unexpectedly of an evening?"

"Sometimes, but Miss Rouse was very methodical over certain things. She entered the names and the time of going and coming of all her guests in her day book." Viola Lakin picked up a slim green book. "Here it is. There isn't an entry for last night."

Traylor inspected the book. "There could have been an entry," he said critically. "The page for March 17 afternoon, section D is missing. Obviously, it's been torn out." He looked at her frowning. "Who could have done that?"

"Miss Rouse might have done it herself. I assure you that there's been no one else here." Viola Lakin gave a little nervous laugh and her tone flounced, "If you think I did it, you're mistaken."

Traylor slipped the book in his pocket. He settled himself on the long flower patterned window seat. "You don't have to wait, Miss Lakin, I'm going to make a few notes."

"Thank you, Mr.—"

"Sergeant," he corrected, "Sergeant Traylor."

Her small oval face relaxed into a brief smile. Ken Traylor found himself responding. He liked gals with thin sensitive nostrils and milky white skins. With a spot of glamor judiciously applied, Miss Lakin would be quite a dish. The brown eyes met his squarely and seemed to warm.

"If you want me," she said. "I'll be down in my office. That push button on the desk over there calls me."

After an instant's reflection that this gal's back view had something for the boys too, he began a tour of the large room. Both waste cans were empty. A book of poems, a recently published sexy novel, and a bottle of white tablets were on the night table. An empty glass had obviously contained milk. He read the label on the bottle. Thyamin chloride, 25mgs.

In the small drawer that opened towards the bed was a yellow bottle, three-quarters full of slightly smaller white tablets. The label had Dr. Margetson's name inscribed and the directions were, "One at bedtime. Repeat in two hours if necessary." Enough tablets to kill her three times over. Why had Lillian Rouse used the gun?

The gun permit was in the drawer. Traylor scanned it. Someone had printed the serial number of the weapon in large characters at the bottom. He

entered the number in his book.

By force of habit he inspected the wound again. The woman hadn't bled heavily. No splashes of blood, only the signs of a steady life-sapping flow. His eyes puckered. An odd place for a wound. Most suicides shot themselves in the temple, men usually chose the mouth.

Lillian Rouse had pulled the trigger when the muzzle was within an inch of her double chins. Margetson's report said the .38 slug had pierced the brain, been deflected by the skull, and lodged behind the left ear. The powder burns showed plainly on the heavily creamed skin.

Traylor went back to the big window. The garage was on the right. To the left, beyond the lawn and a curving stone walk, was the gardener's lodge, with a porch running the length of its north side. He might as well see Albert Grimes, the gardener, before he went back and gave Bill Faraday his box of cigars.

Grimes was at table. Seeing Traylor, he heaved his three hundred pounds out of the huge chair. After wiping a dark hairy hand on his faded blue jeans, he extended it in welcome.

"Expected you, Sergeant," he said with a breathless note in his thick voice. "This is a bad business. It's going to hit me hard. It certainly is." He wagged his big sweating face. "It's not going to be easy for a man of my age to find a new berth." He looked down, and smiled a sheepish apology. "You caught me with my shoes off, Sergeant. Never wear them in the house. Saves cleaning. A man alone ain't got time for chores."

The stout gardener's story checked with the one Ken Traylor had read on the report. Grimes had attended a wrestling match in town on a pass sent him by Senator Brown. Afterwards he had gone to a tavern. He had returned home after midnight. There were no lights in the house.

Grimes insisted on accompanying Traylor to the car. On the porch he stopped to put on his shoes. As they walked towards the coupe, he called Traylor's attention to his plants and shrubs.

They were halfway there when Traylor stopped and knelt on the grass. He was pressing his fingers into the damp surface when he looked up at Grimes and commented, "Nice firm turf you have here."

Grimes' sandy face grinned with pride. "I'll say it is." His voice was boastful. "Look at this." He stepped on to the lawn and stood for a moment.

"It rained last night, Sergeant, but that turf still takes my weight. That's turf, that is!"

"It certainly is," Traylor agreed. He was studying the impressions on the man's big shoes. Presently he straightened up.

"Grimes, you're coming with me to headquarters," he said coldly.

After he had booked Grimes as a material witness, Ken Traylor looked in on his chief. "That woman was murdered, Bill," he announced. "I don't know how, but she *was* murdered. I'll need the portable lab out there, and we'll have an autopsy. I'd like the State Hospital boys to do it."

Lieutenant Faraday gave him a worried look. "Doc Margetson'll be sore. But go ahead."

"I'll need you, too, Bill. Come on, give me a hand."

The veteran police officer grimaced. "I'm getting past it, Ken. I'd like to take Doc's verdict of suicide, and retire without an unsolved crime at the end of my service." He blinked as he met Ken's amused gaze. Then he sighed. "Yeah? Well, count me in, Junior. But strictly on the sidelines."

Before going to the villa, they questioned Miles Moon at his hotel. A lean blonde man in his thirties, Miles seemed too tanned, too immaculate. An overcooked man of distinction. But clearly not the killer type. That was a snap judgment, and Ken Traylor rejected it.

"Sure we quarrelled," Moon said. His faded eyes met Traylor's. "That's why I moved out. She was so darned jealous. The difference in our ages, I suppose. I went over last evening to ask her for a divorce. She refused." He shrugged his tailor-squared shoulders. "She always did."

His weak face smiled. "She knew I had someone else in view. It is the young lady I was with when poor Lillian killed herself. I hope you chaps will be discreet. We don't want any scandal. Her uncle wouldn't appreciate that, you know."

"Rouse gave you an allowance?" Traylor was fighting his prejudice.

"A very generous one. I refused it when we separated, but she insisted on continuing it."

IN THE SMALL hours of the morning a young laboratory technician walked briskly into the homicide office. Bill Faraday was dozing in his chair. Ken Traylor was browsing through press clippings. In the two years since Miles Moon had walked out, Lillian Rouse had given three hundred thousand dollars to charity. Quite a figure.

The young man put a small

bottle before Traylor. "One sleeping tablet in the vitamin bottle, Sergeant. Looks kind of fishy."

Traylor called across to Bill Faraday, "Hear that, chief?"

"Yeah, I heard."

Traylor went to the lab. He came back with three plaster casts. Into each he fitted the heavy shoes he had brought from the Grimes' porch. Bill Faraday watched him sleepily as he made horizontal chalk marks around the heels.

"It doesn't follow that Grimes shot her, simply because he walked across the lawn under the window, Ken. You didn't find his footprints inside, did you?"

Traylor shook his head. His eyes were heavy. He closed them for a moment, and pried them open again.

"Bill, I want you to sleep on something. Dream you are heir to a woman who is giving money away so fast that you wonder if she can have any left for you to inherit. And you need dough to marry a new wife."

Faraday's eyes registered somnolent comprehension. "So you now want the Moon guy picked up?" He yawned. "Tonight, or tomorrow? Heck, I could use some shut-eye."

"Tomorrow. We'll have the autopsy report by then."

Faraday heaved himself to his legs sleepily. He handed Traylor a memo. "Go see my old pal. He phoned. Wants to see the officer in charge, meaning me. Only I'm not in charge. You are."

Traylor's brows went up. "Senator Brown. What is he after?"

"Could be he's worried about his niece being involved in this case. Better see him, Ken. He's an old buddy of mine. Doesn't amount to much politically these days, but you never know. You might want a mortgage one day. He's president of two banks, and he owns the stadium."

Traylor tucked the slip in his pocket book, "I've never met a reformed gangster. It'll be an experience."

"*Ssh*, junior," Bill Faraday made a mock gesture of fright, "Don't act so immature. The senator still has influence. You aren't forgetting he was a close friend of the departed, are you? Could be he'll be able to tell you something."

Brown greeted Ken Traylor cordially from behind a vast mahogany desk. He was a small alert man with large black eyes set deep under bushy eyebrows. His small close-cropped head reminded Traylor of a yellowing tennis ball that had been washed too often. Tanned and

debonair he appeared remarkably youthful for his age. From all accounts he should be touching sixty.

"Glad to meet you, Traylor," Brown said. "I heard a lot about you. Bill told me you're slated to step into his shoes when he retires at the end of the year. Bill's a good fellow, but it's time he took a rest. You can count on me to support your nomination."

Traylor studied the neat little man with professional interest. Brown did not fit into his previous conception of the political boss he knew the man to be. The fellow possessed a charismic magnetism that didn't match his reputation. The kind of guy you couldn't help liking, he decided. After what he'd heard about 'Notebook' Brown he'd decided he didn't like him which showed how dangerous prejudice could be in police work. He noticed the little fellow had unusually small feet.

Brown offered him a cigar which Traylor refused. He waited as the retired political leader lit one for himself, blew out the match and carefully deposited it in a large brass ashtray surmounted by a statue of himself.

His genial expression changed to gravity as, after studying his cigar fixedly for a moment, he turned his slightly age-lined face to Ken Traylor and said, "I'm glad you looked in to see me, Sergeant. There's something I'd like to say. I believe you people are mistaken in thinking poor Lillian Rouse was murdered. Anyone who knew her as well as I did can tell you she was slowly going out of her mind. It was agonizing to watch and not being able to do anything about it. I wanted her to see a psychiatrist but she wouldn't listen. She was as nervous as a cat, you know, and suffered dreadfully from insomnia. She told me she couldn't get a wink of sleep without taking a pill. Doc Margetson gave her the prescription, as you probably know. Insomnia's a terrible thing. I get it myself sometimes."

Ken Traylor nodded. How had the senator managed to get the news that he suspected murder? One of the older hands in the Police Department must have talked.

Brown leaned forward. "Sergeant, I want you to do me a personal favor. My stupid little niece has got herself involved with Miles Moon. A handsome devil but not exactly reliable. If it's at all possible I don't want her name brought into the inquiry—not publicly that is. You can manage that I'm sure."

"It won't be as far as I'm concerned," Traylor felt him-

self surrendering to the senator's personal charm. The guy had the knack of making you feel you had been close friends for years.

Brown's smile broadened. "That's swell, Sergeant. With your excellent understanding of civic affairs you'll do well in our community."

Traylor resisted the temptation to point out that his idea of understanding civic affairs didn't jell with the senator's. Brown stood up to signify their meeting was over. When he walked out from behind his desk with his hand outstretched for a parting handshake, the sergeant was struck by the smallness of the man.

Driving back downtown Traylor ran over in his mind the various points Brown had made. It was quite natural of course for a man in his position to want to keep his niece's name out of the case. But why had the senator mentioned Miles Moon? His voice had intimated that if murder was suspected Moon would be the man to investigate.

Ken Traylor frowned. Just because the guy was estranged from his wife, and had a reputation for being a swinger didn't make him the prime suspect. He couldn't banish from his mind that the little senator knew too much about the police inquiry.

At the corner of Elm and Main Traylor parked his car and entered the ancient Professional Building to talk to Theodore Brake, Lillian Rouse's attorney.

"One fact might have some significance in showing the poor woman's intent to end her life," Brake said after they had discussed the affair at some length. "Two weeks before her death Miss Rouse called my clerk to ask us to let her have an immediate accounting of her entire estate. That's not odd in itself. She often did this, she owned

six productive oil wells in California."

Brake smiled mysteriously behind his large shell glasses. "What is odd, though, she didn't send a confirmatory letter, as she always does on any phone conversation. I suppose this got past Miss Lakin."

"Did you send the accounting?"

Traylor's interest was sharpened.

"I had it prepared." Brake was obviously pleased at his own caution. "But I kept it on file, and there is no reason why you shouldn't see it."

Ken Traylor whistled as he read the figures. "Anyone else in town know how much she was worth?"

"No one, outside myself. Miss Rouse didn't even want the First National Bank people to know. When she gave big sums, the money came from a trust company in California." Brake sighed. "She had too much money. I made that statement up after Senator Brown got $250,000 for his new War Orphan's Educational Institute scheme. She gave him that unconditionally, like all her bequests."

Brake laid another document on legal paper before Traylor. He pointed with his gold pencil. "Her will—just read this last paragraph."

"Holy mackerel, that's a lot of money."

Brake spoke with a hint of censure, "She certainly was exceedingly trustful of her fellowmen."

"So it seems." Ken Traylor nodded. "And there's still plenty left."

The old lawyer smiled. "If I suspected murder, which I don't, I'd be inclined to remember that no one knew where she got her money from, or how much she had."

"How about the secretary?"

"Unlikely. We used a code name for every investment. That was my client's idea."

KEN TRAYLOR drove out to *My Vista*. He found Viola Lakin busy at the typewriter in her small office. There was a bowl of freshly picked roses on the table.

She greeted him as if they were already well acquainted. "More questions, Sergeant?" The large brown eyes were friendly. "Excuse me for a moment." She whipped a letter from the machine, read it carefully and put it in the drawer. "Now, I'm ready," she said with a small smile.

"You know Mr. Moon very well," Traylor asked.

"Naturally. He was here most every day."

"Did he pay you any parti-

cular attention?" Traylor smiled disarmingly, "You weren't the other woman in his plans, I suppose."

She jerked her face around sharply. Small red flags flamed on each milky cheek. For an instant she seemed to hesitate. Then she said tartly, "No, we were just good friends. What horrible minds policemen have."

Ken Traylor ignored the sally. He was watching her closely, noticing how her thin nostrils had dilated.

"Did Miss Rouse take sleeping pills every night?"

"I think so. She was such a terribly light sleeper. She used to say a mouse couldn't walk across the porch of the lodge without disturbing her."

She smiled tolerantly. "Poor Lillian took everything; vitamins, mineral supplements, sleeping pills and slimming aids. She wanted to get her weight down to a hundred and twenty like me."

"Was she a close friend of Senator Brown?"

"I would say so. He was here whenever he had a new charity to discuss." She smiled reminiscently. "That little man positively oozed good works with other people's money, especially Miss Rouse's."

"Did you know the sources of her income, Miss Lakin." Traylor made his voice sound casual.

She shook her head. Her eyes rested reflectively on his for a moment. "Not exactly. She had investments somewhere, I know. She never told me. She was very close about some things."

"Did you phone Brake, her attorney, for an accounting of Miss Rouse's holdings, five days before her death?"

"No, Sergeant, I did not." Traylor thought her voice sounded chilled. The blood seemed to have drained from her face.

"Did Miss Rouse do so herself?"

She shook her head decisively. "She would have told me, I am sure. She always sent a confirmatory letter to Mr. Brake on anything like that."

The phone bell rang. Miss Lakin went to the lobby. She was back quickly, "It's for you, Sergeant, your office."

"Ken," shouted Faraday at the other end, "Come in. We got something for you."

BACK AT headquarters, Bill Faraday handed him the autopsy report. As Traylor read it, a V came into his forehead. He put it down, still frowning, and looked at his chiefs. The report said that Lillian Rouse could have been dead from a heavy

dose of sleeping pills when she was supposed to have shot herself.

"Yeah," Bill Faraday said, "Someone wanted to be sure. They made her take the sleeping pills by mistake all right—remember there was one in the vitamin bottle. That adds up. But the shooting."

Traylor picked up the autopsy report and read it again slowly. He glanced at a report on Grimes from Los Angeles. "I have an angle, Bill. I'll need a guinea pig to try it out. A gal about one hundred and twenty pounds, feet not too big. Someone we can trust."

Bill Faraday scratched his grey head. His eyes lit suddenly, "I know just the one. Lucy Smith, Doc Margetson's nurse. Her dad was on the force. When do you want her?"

"Tonight about five, and we'll clear the villa. I'll be working up there."

The telephone rang. Traylor picked it up. A familiar voice asked for Bill Faraday. Traylor handed the phone to Faraday without comment. There was disapproval in his glance.

"No, Nick," Bill Faraday said coloring slightly under Traylor's scrutiny, "Not a thing, new. Yes, Nick, yes, I will." He grimaced at Traylor as he put down the receiver. "Why does he have to pick on me?" he said sadly. "Some guys can't keep up with the times."

Ken Traylor went and got the death gun, a U.S. manufactured .38. He inspected the dull blue weapon carefully. It had been oiled and cleaned recently. His interest sharpened. You would hardly expect a woman like Lillian Rouse to keep her gun in professional condition. The woman either knew a lot about automatics, or there was someone at *My Vista* who did. That was something to check. Presently he called over to his chief.

Bill Faraday looked up sharply as he noted the surpressed excitement in Ken's voice, "Yeah, What of it, Junior?"

"This isn't the gun for which Lillian Rouse's permit was issued. The number doesn't check. This gun came out of the factory about five years after she got her permit."

Bill Faraday came over. "Could be she made a swap. We can check. I'll put a man on it. Say, what about this Grimes baby? How long we going to hold him."

"I'll see him now, Bill."

Traylor took a slip of paper from the desk and went to the detention room. Grimes was sleepy. He yawned. "I'm worried about the garden, Sergeant. It can get in a mess so easy."

Traylor glanced at the sheet of paper. "Why didn't you tell us you were Lillian Rouse's first husband, Grimes?"

Grimes' small mouth gaped. He made a little whimpering sound in his throat. "She didn't want it known. She divorced me when I was in San Quentin." His eyes were downcast. "I suppose you know about that, too." He cleared his throat. "She said I would be bad for her career, but she always took care of me."

Grimes turned his stricken face up to Traylor's. His eyes sought sympathy. "It's been hell, through the years, having to stand by and see that Moon fellow make a monkey of her. He's been carrying on with that secretary right under Lillian's nose. I warned her, but she loved him, I guess."

"Do you know where Mrs. Rouse got the gun, Grimes?"

"I bought it for her, about fifteen years in San Francisco. It was an old one then."

"Ever clean it for her?"

"No, I did not. I didn't even know she still had the thing."

Ken Traylor left the detention room and went to the armory.

"Make me up a clip of blanks for a .38," he told the clerk, "and be damned sure they are blanks."

Back at his desk he studied the plaster casts of the footprints on the lawn. Then he detailed a man to visit the two gunsmiths in the nearby city, and drove over to pick up Doc Margetson, and Lucy Smith. The police department's portable laboratory was already at the villa.

They worked for an hour on that lawn. Afterwards, Traylor took the doctor and the nurse into Lillian Rouse's bedroom. There was something of which he had to be sure. When he came out on the porch, the maple trees were black silhouettes against the fall evening sky. His stomach reminded him it was supper time but he vetoed the idea. There was too much to be done.

With the case on his mind, Traylor shunned sleep. After midnight, he set out to drive without destination. His watch showed two as he brought the car to a standstill on the highway a few hundred yards away from *My Vista.*

He lit himself a cigarette. He was thinking about Viola Lakin. She had lied to him about her association with Miles Moon. He was sure of that. And she was lying about the phone call on the accounting of the Rouse estate. She might not have made the call, but she knew it had been made.

Was she covering up Miles

Moon? If she was in love with him and was hoping to marry him, she would. But Miles Moon was planning to marry Sylvia Brown.

Did Viola Lakin know this? Chances were she didn't. If he could let her know that conclusively, something might happen to help break the case. The idea was worth trying. Traylor stubbed out his cigarette, got out of the car and set off through the darkness towards the villa. Had the missing page in the dead woman's day book any significance? He hoped not. The lab boys hadn't found an imprint of any entry on that missing page. But why was it missing?

He contacted the trooper guarding the gate. The man signalled to his colleague on the porch, and Traylor continued, walking on the grass to deaden the sound of his footsteps.

The officer to whom Traylor had given the gun loaded with blanks was excited.

"She heard my shot sure enough, Sergeant," he said. "She was out of her room in a flash and came running across the hall in her nightie. 'No, lady,' I said, 'there wasn't a shot. You must have been dreamin.' She looked good and mad, and rushed back in again."

Traylor sat in the coupe, weighing the implication of the information. If Viola Lakin was in her bedroom as she claimed to have been when her employer was killed, she must have heard the death shot. Why was she lying? His mind went to the experiments on the lawn and in the Villa he had made with Lucy Smith. They showed that a woman could have killed Lillian Rouse. But it was only theory. He had not a shred of evidence as to whose finger had pressed the trigger of the death gun.

He did not see the dark mass of the other car draw up beside him, but he was suddenly and fearfully aware of the menace of its presence. Instinctively, he reached for his gun. He pushed it up as the darkness outside his car exploded in a chasm of purple flame. He fired aimlessly as the explosion from the other man's gun rushed at him. His head filled with the thunderous noise of a close-up fusilade of shots, rapidly fired. He ducked, and fired again. Then a heavy weight hit him somewhere, and he passed out.

KEN TRAYLOR came to in daylight in a shaded room. A hospital smell assailed his nose. He opened his eyes. A blonde nurse motioned him to be silent, and called a doctor.

"You're lucky, Sergeant," he said. "We took three slugs out

of you." He grinned. "You'll soon be okay. Lucky for you your troopers out at the Villa heard the shots, and brought you in quick enough."

Ken Traylor tried to grin. His neck was stiff, and there seemed to be a lump as big as a half grapefruit over his right eye. His left shoulder hurt abominably.

Three days later, over the doctors' protests, Traylor took up the case again. While lying in bed, he had done a lot of thinking. To follow this case, he would have to abandon normal police methods, but he would have to make the utmost use of the department's resources. Bill Faraday had carried out his instructions to the letter. The dead woman's gun had not been cleaned, or checked by either one of the town's two gunsmiths. Senator Brown had divulged that Viola Lakin had been a show girl in one of Lillian Rouse's productions when she had hired her as secretary. Brown had also volunteered the information that he had been sick in bed the day of the crime. This alibi of his had been confirmed by Doc Margetson.

Traylor smiled, "So you even checked on the big man, Bill."

Bill Faraday grimaced. "I'm learning slowly. But we have not got a lead on who did the job on you."

Traylor drew a figurative breath. "Whoever killed Lillian Rouse thinks we're getting too close." The impression of Viola Lakin's face moved slowly across his mind. "Bill, I'm going to try something out of routine," he said. "We'll need some extra men and a highway check. If someone wants to move out, it'll be tonight."

At six in the evening, Ken Traylor went to *My Vista*, taking Grimes and Moon, whom he kept out of sight in separate squad cars, while he went to talk to Viola Lakin. She raised her eyebrows at his bandages, "You're hurt, Sergeant?"

Traylor nodded, "Someone got rough with me," he said grimly.

A sympathetic smile came on her lips, "I'm glad they didn't get too rough."

Traylor walked to the window, turning his back on her. Then he swung around. "Miss Lakin, will you help me on this case?"

She looked surprised. "Of course! But what can I do? I've told you all I know." Her voice was expressionless. "What do you want me to do?"

"I want you to pretend you are Lillian Rouse for a few minutes. I want you to get into her bed, and pretend to be

asleep. I'm bringing some people here."

For a moment she gazed at him. The dark pupils were dilated. She frowned. "All right, Sergeant. When do I start?"

"You can get into your pajamas right now," Traylor said, "I'm going to cover your eyes. You won't mind?"

"Of course not."

"Good. Call me when you're ready."

When she was under the covers, Ken Traylor tied a bandage lightly around her eyes. "Don't be nervous. I'm not going to hurt you," he said reassuringly. She was wearing green silk pajamas that revealed the ample contour of her breasts.

"Shall I cream my face?" she asked humorously. "I usually do when I go to bed."

"It isn't necessary. Just imagine you are under the influence of a sleeping aid. And don't resist when I move your hand."

She smiled, "It's like Yogi or something. I'm beginning to think I am really asleep. I hope they won't take any pictures."

* * *

Miles Moon froze to a sudden halt when he saw the figure on the bed. His grey eyes stared wildly. He looked at Ken Traylor, "Gosh, what's happened?"

"Sleeping pills are tricky things," said Traylor. "Sit down." He turned and nodded at the perspiring Grimes. "You too, Grimes."

Moon perched on the edge of the chair, his taut hands clutching his knees.

"Your wife was murdered, Mr. Moon," Traylor said, "under very peculiar circumstances. The murderer was somewhat ingenious." He gave Moon a long hard scrutiny.

Moon jumped up. A trooper grabbed his arm. "I didn't do it. I swear." He smacked his right fist into the palm of his hand, "You know where I was that night. I can prove it. You fellows know the time of her death. How the hell could I kill her?"

He spun around and shot a long slender forefinger at Grimes. "That's the killer. He hated her. He swore to get even."

"I'm going to show you how your wife was killed," Traylor said. "The murderer knew it was next to impossible to get near Miss Rouse unless she was under the influence of her sleeping pills. She was a remarkably light sleeper. It was easy to give her a heavy dose by putting the pills in the bottle where she kept her vitamin tablets. The sleeping tablets would have killed her, but that would have

led to an inquiry. This death had to be made to look like suicide, beyond all doubt, so the killer waited until he knew Miss Rouse would be unconscious, and entered by the window. He took Miss Rouse's own gun in a gloved hand, and put it in her relaxed fingers—like this."

Traylor put the .38 in Viola Lakin's limp fingers. For an instant he looked sternly at Moon, then his eyes went back to the composed face of the woman in the bed. "So, by raising her arm like this"—the hand in which he had placed the gun offered no resistance—"it was easy to force the muzzle into the victim's throat, and snap the trigger with your wife's fingers in the trigger guard. This guard, however, is too small for two fingers. A man might have to use a pencil."

Traylor reached over and took the silver pencil in Moon's jacket pocket. The pointed end he placed in the trigger guard under Viola Lakin's finger.

The trigger clicked noisily. Viola Lakin drew a deep breath. Her face had got paler.

Traylor regarded Moon. The man looked wretched. A dribble of spittle ran down the corner of his tight mouth. He wiped it with the back of his hand.

"I didn't kill her," he cried hollowly. "We fought like hell, but I didn't kill her." His eyes bulged. "Damn it, you know where I was the night she died."

Traylor pitched his voice a shade higher. "We know you spent the evening of the 14th of March with the young woman you planned to marry."

He glanced at Viola Lakin, and experienced a moment of swift satisfaction. Her wide lips were parted as if she was having trouble in breathing. His plan was working. He looked accusingly at Moon.

"You'll admit that a married man who fixes a date to marry a girl while his rich wife is still alive has a motive for murder."

Moon swayed to his feet. "Don't bring her name into it," he pleaded. "You promised you wouldn't. She had nothing to do with it."

Traylor heard Viola Lakin take a deep breath. He swung his gaze down to her. She had snatched off the bandage. The large brown eyes stared fixedly into his.

"All right, Sergeant," she said thinly. Her lips were in a half smile, "You can arrest me." Her neck and shoulders were chalk white. "You win, Sergeant. I did it."

"She's lying. She didn't. I know." Moon's voice was a panic-stricken scream. He looked imploringly at Traylor. "Sergeant, I want to make a statement."

Traylor signaled to the troopers. Two of them rushed Moon out to the squad car. Ken Traylor and Bill Faraday went out on the porch.

"Moon's going to sing, Bill," Traylor said. "Have the boys treat him gently. He'll tell plenty. And then make that trip downtown." He nodded in the direction of the bedroom, "I'll look after her."

He found Viola Lakin sitting on the window bench. She rose uneasily as he entered. Her eyes were puffed as if she had been crying. She stood up as Traylor entered and said with the vestige of a smile, "Here I am, Sergeant. Your prisoner. I forgot to tell you that I substituted the sleeping pills for the vitamins, but I suppose you've found out. It was quite easy. Miss Rouse insisted on keeping both bottles under refrigeration. My last duty at night was to put them at her bedside."

She extended her hands. "Are you going to handcuff me? I've been trying to remember whether they send women to the chair in this state."

Traylor shook his head. "Sorry Miss Lakin. You won't even get a trial."

A flash of fear showed on the sculptured face. "I con-

fessed, didn't I? What more do you want?"

"You told a lie hoping it would help Mr. Moon, but it won't. You probably didn't know that his car was parked in the driveway on the night of the murder. We've checked the tire prints."

"You think of everything but you happen to be wrong. Poor Mr. Moon didn't have a car. The coupe belonged to Miss Rouse." Viola Lakin subsided in tears on the lounge chair. She gave Traylor a damp smile. "Miles is so terribly weak about some things and Miss Rouse really treated him badly. I wanted him to get away, even if he is going with that girl."

She scrubbed at her eyes with the backs of her hands. "I'm sure he didn't do it. I know him so well. We were so close before she came on the scene. Miles wouldn't hurt a fly. I'm sure he wouldn't. I'm more guilty than he is. Please, you mustn't arrest him."

Traylor saw she was on the point of collapse. He told her she could expect a longish session with the DA the next day.

"I'd advise you to tell the truth," he added.

Viola Lakin smiled through her tears. "I will—all of it. I promise I'll do anything to help you find the real killer. I mean this. You see I'm quite cured."

BILL FARADAY was waiting jubilantly at headquarters. "We picked up the Senator, Ken. He's as good as confessed. Tried to bump himself off, but the gun didn't work. It was the rod Rouse had a permit for, an old German number. The firing pin don't connect on U.S. ammunition."

Ken Traylor nodded, "I figured something like that. That's why Nick Brown had to do the job with his own gun. He got a tough break there. He had to leave it in her hand, to make the suicide idea stick. It was the wrong thing to do."

Late that night, in the DA's office, after they had read two lengthy statements made by Moon, Bill Faraday took fifteen dollars from his pocket and laid it on the table. "I still don't know how you got a lead on old Brown, Ken," he said, grinning ruefully.

"I didn't until he started acting up," Traylor admitted. "Remember we took casts of what appeared to be Grimes' footprints on the lawn, leading to and from the ladder. Grimes didn't make them. Grimes weighs two hundred and fifty pounds. The imprints were made by someone who weighed about one hundred and twenty pounds, and wore shoes small enough to slip into Grimes' gardening shoes. A woman's

size eight did the trick. That made me think a woman did the job. I had ruled out Moon. His feet were too big, and he's not the type for physical violence. When I found out that Viola Lakin was lying consistently, I thought it was her. She had motive enough, Moon promised to marry her, and she knew the dead woman's habits intimately. But I had a hunch she didn't do it."

Ken Traylor picked up Moon's signed statement. "Moon's story makes sense," he said. "He insists Brown planned the job for him to do. Brown even chose the date, and gave Grimes an Annie Oakley for the wrestling match. Moon's prize was marriage to Brown's niece, and a generous inheritance under the will.

"Moon admits here that Brown had him worried about Lillian Rouse giving her money away too fast, and that he had Viola Lakin call Theodore Brake, the attorney, for an accounting of the estate. She did that because she was crazy about Moon and wanted to help him look after his interests.

"When Moon backed out at the last minute of the night Brown selected, he stood up Viola Lakin for a date with Sylvia. So Brown decided to do the job himself. An experienced hand at mayhem, he wasn't taking any risks. He had himself an alibi, even if Moon had done the job as he wanted. He called Doc Margetson that afternoon saying he was off color. The Doc obligingly put him to bed.

"The rest was easy. Around nine he drove to the villa. Moon swears someone used the coupe—had a friendly chat with Lillian Rouse over some charity or other and switched the sleeping tablets in the vitamin bottle. That would be easy, while she was fixing a drink or something. Doc Margetson prescribed the same kind for him. Then Brown went back to his room. Around 11:30, he was back at the villa. His intimate knowledge of the routine at *My Vista* gave him the bright idea of slipping Grimes' big garden shoes over his own size sevens.

"If there was a suspicion of foul play, Brown figured those prints would point to Grimes. He knew Lillian Rouse's habits. After killing her, he ripped the page out of her day book on which she had recorded his evening visit. Brown thought of everything."

Bill Faraday unwrapped a cigar. "What beats me, Junior, is how you thought of Brown without a single direct clue."

Traylor grinned, "If he hadn't gotten so anxious, I never would have found him. After he sent for me that day it

hit me hard he wasn't exactly the type to be concerned about his niece's welfare, on social grounds. Then why the heck was he so interested? I kept asking myself that. I knew he had a thundering big motive for wanting Lillian Rouse dead. He'd been playing the horses, and he needed money desperately. When the lawyer told me that both he and Moon stood to inherit half a million dollars under the Rouse will, I was sure one of them was our man. But which? I had no proof. Then Brown tried to wipe me out in the good old-fashioned way that bore his signature. Killers usually talk, one way or the other."

Traylor's face was suddenly serious. "Which reminds me, Bill, there's a leakage in the department. Someone close inside must have tipped Brown off we were hep to murder."

Bill Faraday grinned sheepishly. He winked at his young assistant, "I'll have to give that man a severe talking to," he said, "some of the old guys around here don't know when to keep their lips buttoned."

Ken Traylor patted him on the shoulder, "On second thoughts, Chief, I wouldn't be too hard on the fellow. He knew just what to tell on this case."

Ken Traylor chuckled as he picked up the greenbacks. "And he won me fifteen bucks. I'd say he's quite a guy."

NEXT MONTH:

THE DIRTY KILLINGS OF

PITTSBURGH PHIL

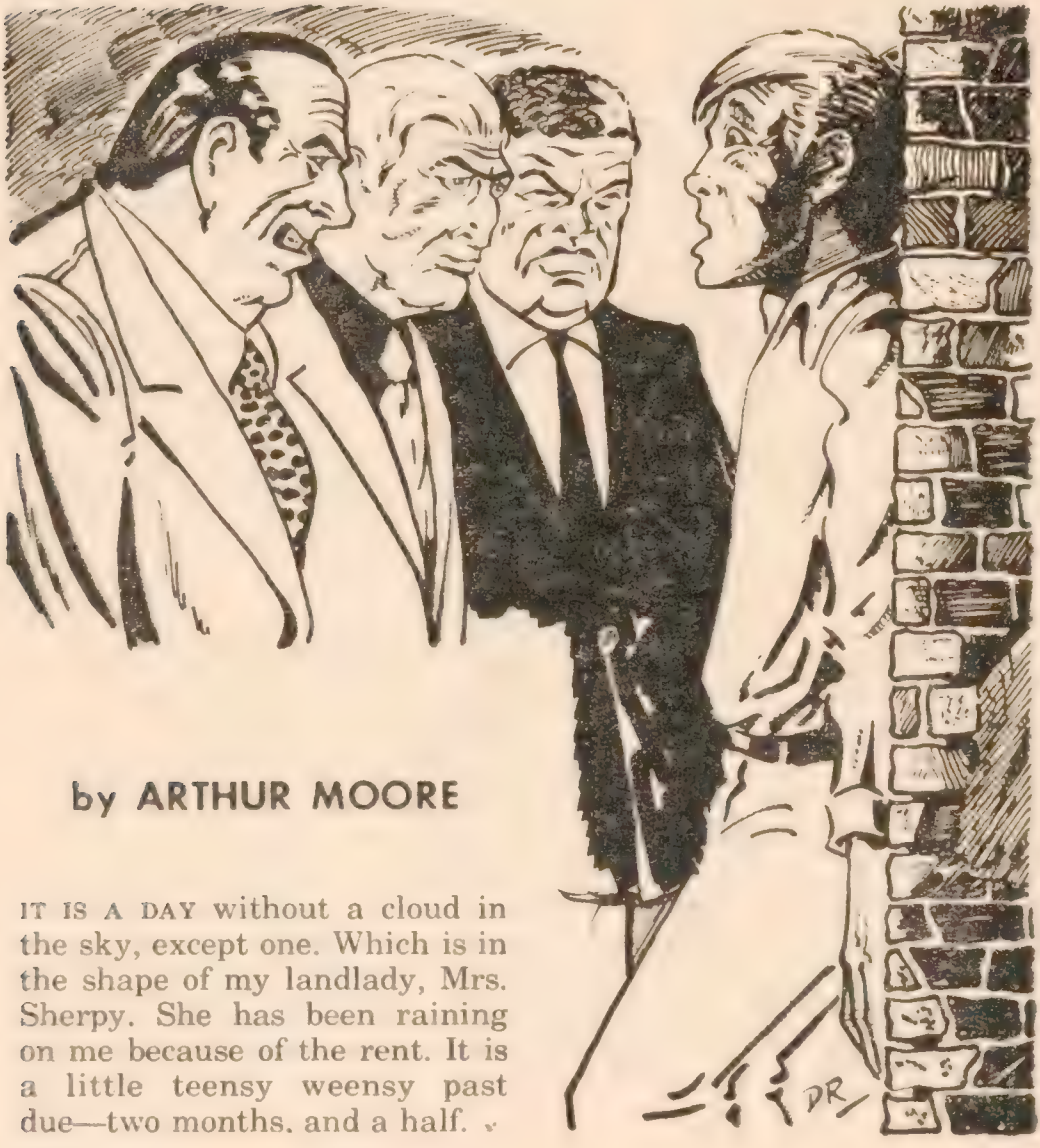
Another Sensational New TRUE CRIME Gangland Thriller

by DAVID MAZROFF

The series of brutal and vicious gangland killings puzzled the police for a long time. In every investigation, three names kept popping up: Pep, Harry Strauss, and Pittsburgh Phil. They were all one man: a beast who enjoyed watching men die, and who used an ice pick or ax for the fun of it!

MY DAY TO PAY THE RENT

The mob had a contract on me. I was as dead as a can of last week's horsemeat. Unless. . .



by ARTHUR MOORE

IT IS A DAY without a cloud in the sky, except one. Which is in the shape of my landlady, Mrs. Sherpy. She has been raining on me because of the rent. It is a little teensy weensy past due—two months, and a half.

She has this big thing about promptness. You would think I got points for hitting the first of the month.

Naturally I am considering this rent thing, which is mixed in with the large problems, like where can I get a fin for the second race, when Faceless Robert backs me into the shadows of the alley.

Faceless is a tall, ugly pinstripe who was born with somebody else's fingerprints. He has a face that only a mother could love, if said mother happened also to be a vampire. He has never been known to smile. He smirked once at the news of the St. Valentine's Day Massacre, but that does not really count. Besides, it was Gunny, his right hand trigger, who told the story and Gunny seldom says anything that is not curious or illegal.

Faceless regards me with his rustproof head cocked on one side and transfers the matchstick he is chewing back and forth in his stainless steel teeth.

He says "Dubois, how would you like to make a Jackson?"

Naturally I do not consider this a question. It is only his way of telling me I am tagged for something. Whatever it is I am scared of it. My knees are knocking together and I know I am pale as a spoonful of skim milk.

The idea that he would pay me twenty bucks makes it serious and I am wondering who he wants me to shoot. I hope it is not the President. I do not have the fare to Washington.

"My boys are busy right now," Faceless continues, "so I want you should be a messenger for me."

"A m-m-messenger?"

"You are the only—um—honest mark this side of Leavenworth," he says, "and I am trusting you with a very heavy proposition." He pulls out a padded packet and slaps it into his other claw. "I want you should take this wad to Roxy Callahan's joint."

"What's in it?"

"Moolah," he says to me. "Mazumaroonies to the number of fifty grand."

That is when I curl up and collapse and capsize to the earth for the count. The idea that Faceless would place fifty thousand flags in my care is as straight as a three-headed coin. I have heard there is that much money in the world, but I did not expect to slide into its shadow. I would figure it to give off a glow, or that music would play softly in its presence.

When I come to, Faceless is annoyed. He is also slapping

my kisser with the packet. I have never been hit before with a pound of paper money. It rolls my eyes up in my head, and Faceless is growling like Godzilla with a bad cold. He yanks me upright and leans my spine against a fence. I do not scale more than the shadow of a slice of salami so he does this with no strain. He props me there by pushing on the packet which is tucked under my third rib.

My eyelids flutter open. Faceless is still there, which causes me to moan slightly. He goes on, "Like I said, little pal, you will take this here wad to Roxy and he will give you an envelope to bring to me."

"He w–will?"

"That is the deal." He leans down and fixes me with an armor-piercing stare. "There is one large thing to remember in this exchange."

"And t-that is?"

"Do not come back without the envelope from Roxy."

He pounds my chest with the wad of greenies. My lungs are as thin as a politician's explanation of why he just raised his own salary. Faceless says, using his coal-scuttle voice that reminds me of jagged rocks being dragged over boulders, "Do not come back without the envelope."

I gulp, being unable to make sounds. It is engraved on my soul. He lets up on the pressure and my single pint of skim blood slowly begins to seep through the squashed veins. My color returns to pale blue. Then he shoves the packet at me, points the matchstick and says, "Remember what I told you, little pal."

"Don't come back without the envelope," I say.

"Them are the magic words. I will be at the club." Faceless takes off.

I am left with fifty thousand iron men and my memories. It has been a crummy life, but my future is beginning to look like a soot-filled portrait of the bottom of the well at midnight. Roxy Callahan is just as tough as Faceless, and a little slicker. He was once attacked by a hungry shark while swimming, and the shark complained later to the Lifeguard's Union of unfair use of thumbs.

But I have got to go and deliver the packet or Faceless will do routine damage to me. And I do not want, of all things, to break a lifetime habit —breathing. He has a credit card at Tortoni's Mortuary, and rents flowers by the week. My last ride would be in a hearse, to the river, and I would be wearing concrete booties. Like forever.

So when I am able to get most of my arms and legs to

function I put the packet in my inside coat pocket and coax my feet to go to Katzie's Saloon. Which they do.

Jonesy is behind the bar when I stumble in. He is chewing on his tongue—the strongest part of him—and trying to beat Wall Eye in a game of TicTacToe. Jonesy is a large stomach with a soft, round head and a wiggly little mustache. He gives advice on anything; his mouth is always in the 'on' position. He is also gullible. He is so stupid he once used a bottle of spot remover to get rid of a troublesome dog.

I slide onto a stool and Jonesy says, "Hi, Dubois. What's that wad in your pocket?"

I pat the packet and tell him it is nothing. He is so nosey and curious he cannot bear not to know everything that goes on. He says, "It's a square kind of nothing, like a wallet. What's in it, Dubois?"

"A lawnmower," I say.

"Oh," he says, then he gives me a very suspicious peer and a squint. He does not believe it. He brushes Wall Eye aside and tries to feel what is in my pocket. He does not give up.

To change the theme I ask him about Wall Eye. He is a second generation safe-cracker who is out of work. Jonesy lays this info on me while he stares at the bulge in my pocket. Wall Eye goes to a corner table and leans on a lager.

When I mention Roxy Callahan, Jonesy's little mustache quivers and he begins to breathe hard. He is very curious and smells a rat. He also smells like cat food. I am afraid he will shadow me when I leave the saloon, so I finally tell him about Faceless and the wad of bucks.

Naturally he wants to see inside the packet. His angora colored eyes get huge as he fingers the mint berries and he begins to drool.

He gets one of the bills wet and the ink runs.

We both stare at the blotch and I am thinking this is a calamity there is no name for. Faceless' loot is so phony it could run for councilman.

"Faceless give you this stuff?" Jonesy says, like it is the end of the world and we don't have tickets for the explosion.

I nod around the lump in my throat. Faceless has sent me to my doom. He has provided me with phony-baloney bucks and he expects me to deliver them to a quick cat like Roxy Callahan. If Roxy spots the play money, he will stuff them where I would be better off without them. Roxy is a guy who does not like jokes he does

not understand. He laughs at starving widows and orphanage fires. His idea of a gag is to write letters to the Pope asking for alimony.

I seal up the packet and tuck it away again. Then I ask Jonesy for a slip of paper, and write out my will. I leave Mrs. Sherpy the twenty clams Faceless is about to owe me. Otherwise she would dig me up and sell my shoes.

Jonesy says good-by at the door and tells me not to do nothing else to get him sore. So I stumble across town to Roxy Callahan's joint.

Roxy runs a strip and clip casino. The customers are clipped while the girls strip. No one gets warm but Roxy. Most of the furniture in the joint is hot, and he wears a heater under his arm. Also his boys are very tough. They hate to get their hands dirty—unless it is with blood.

Roxy is expecting me.

A large, linebacker size gorilla swings me to the back office and scratches at the door with a hairy paw. Roxy growls to come in. The gorilla tosses me inside and slams the door. I am shaking like an unclad clown in an icy clime, but I am also sweating so much it is filling my shoes.

Roxy says, "Faceless sent you, huh?"

I manage a nod and try to get the packet out of my inside pocket. He snarls at me, "OK, where's the dough?"

The packet is so slippery I have to get both hands on it. Then, when I pull it out, it spills on the floor. He says

many earthy Irish things and bounces me off a bookcase when I try to pick up the bucks. He quick counts the clams, with one eye on me, muttering like a miser, then cuckling so I can see his fangs.

He don't spot the phony lettuce. I watch him go across and open a big Trimble Safe and fold the flags into same. I can see stacks of silver certificates on the shelf. Roxy don't run a shearing service for sous.

He takes out a small envelope and shows it to me.

"This is what Faceless wants," he says with a certain snarl. Then he slips it back in the safe and slams the door. "You tell Faceless for me that he has got to pony up another twenny grand or no dice."

"B-b-but. . ." I try to say.

He lays the kind of frown on me that sinks ships. "Dubois, you could not think your way out of a hula hoop. Do what I tell you."

"Faceless w-will kill me," I gulped.

He shrugs. He don't care one way or the other. He opens the door and throws me out. The gorilla is grunting outside. He opens the alley door and tosses me onto a pile of beer cans.

Now I am in trouble.

I have conveyed the cash but I am chumped out of the envelope. And Faceless has said the envelope from Roxy is the most important thing of all.

I moan. Why did I have to meet Faceless in the alley? I have got the same fate line as the *Titanic* and Bluebeard's first six wives. When I struggle back to Katzie's, Jonesy is sure I have contracted malaria en route. I am shaking so much I am wearing out my underwear. Faceless will mash me into small meatballs and dump me down the disposer. That's if he's only furious.

Jonesy says, "You delivered the lettuce but you didn't get the gizmo that Faceless wants?"

I nod helplessly. "Roxy is holding out for another hatful."

"But Faceless told you not to come back without it!"

I deal him my best disgusted look. Jonesy is the mouth-of-the-month. He is so fat and ugly he cannot even get a job posing for the 'before' pictures. I tell him I know what Faceless said.

He informs me? "Faceless once dunked a guy in gasoline and used him for a Fourth of July sparkler just for doing what you done."

I scream at him to shut up. I know all about Faceless.

He says, lowering his voice and rolling his dumb eyes, "Maybe you better buy a ticket to Siberia or the dark side of

Bolivia. Don't bother going home to pack."

I turn away so I don't have to look at him, and I see Wall Eye, lonesome in the corner. Wall Eye is a professional safe-cracker. Wall Eye could blow Roxy's safe and get me the envelope!

I rush to brace him. Wall Eye listens with one eye on me at a time. He is a short gee with a set of eyes that don't quite match. He looks like a guy with a transplant from a left-handed halibut, so I do not try to trade glances. I fix my desperate gaze on his Adam's apple.

"All we got to do," I tell him, "Is blow one lousy little safe. There is a wad of moo inside and it is all yours."

He asks, "How do you know the box is loaded?"

I reveal to him what I saw and what I need. He rubs his chin in thought and the fishy eyes roll around in his head.

"The club knocks off at two in the AM," I say, "and don't open till near noon the next day. It should be a cinch to get in."

"That's no problem," Wall Eye says sadly. "It's these new safes they got these days. They are harder to crack than aluminum walnuts. If only I could find another old time Trimble safe. Them was the ones I loved. I could get inside a Trimble like slicing jello with a hatchet."

"Roxy's got a Trimble!" I shout.

Wall Eye's face lights up like he has swallowed Times Square.

"Then I'm in," he says, with a cross-eyed look.

So I draw a plan of Roxy's office and the alley and we plan our getaway.

It is three-thirty in the AM of a foggy morning when we slink down the alley behind Roxy's club. There is nobody around but a yellow cat that is about to call it a night. Wall Eye is also a burglar; you got to get inside first, right? He uses a jimmy on the back door and we ease it off the hinges. Then I pull the blinds on the office windows and switch on the lights. The safe is sitting there waiting for us. It even seems to smile.

Then Wall Eye groans. "They got a Schmidt Adapter on it."

I ask what the hell is a Schmidt Adapter?

He says, "It's to keep peelers like me from stripping it. Like I said, the old Trimbles were easy. A girl scout could pick one with a cookie."

"Well, can you bust past the Adapter?"

He sighs, looking it over. "I'll have to blow it with nitro."

"That's what I thought you

were gonna do in the first place."

He sets his bag in front of the safe and lays a warning look on me. "Remember, I am a peeler, not a explosives hooligan. Give me about an hour." He opens the bag. "You're sure there's green stuff in the box?"

"Bags of it," I assure him. Then I sit and watch him mold the channels and dams for the nitro. When he pours in the yellowish fluid he closes one eye, which is a relief to me. He sets the fuse, and he is nervous as the co-pilot of a time capsule.

When he finishes we duck out and Wall Eye says, "I hope I done it right."

By that time I am crawling with live nerve-ends.

He sets off the blast. It makes a horrendous boom. The room fills with smoke and flames shoot out of the safe. The door of the safe slowly swings open.

Everything inside it is burned to ashes.

Wall Eye is a peeler all right, not an explosives hooligan. I do not doubt that for an instant. I am not doubting it while me and him run down the alley together. The blast has set off the alarm system and it is clanging like the bell at Sing Sing. Not the little one, the *big* bell. The one you can hear all the way to Perth Amboy.

But we get away before anybody with brass buttons arrives.

We run all the way to the bus station. Wall Eye shakes with me, says he is sorry the caper collapsed, and sails on the next bus to Nowhere. I slink back to my pad at Mrs. Sherpy's Boardinghouse and pull the covers over my head.

But I cannot sleep. The squeaking keeps me awake. I am shaking so much the rusty springs vibrate, and two pictures slide sideways on the wall. I am positive my hours are numbered. Faceless expects me in his office yesterday. When I do not show with the envelope he will send his goons after me. They will wad me in the glove compartment for the ride back to his den where Faceless will start with something unpleasant, like piercing my ears—with bullets.

In the morning I have not thought of any way out. I do not have the dough for a ticket next door. I slide down the back stairs, knowing this is the first place Faceless will look. I run to Katzie's Saloon and ask Jonesy if I can live behind the beer cases in the storeroom till I can think of some clever way to evade doom.

"You better give yourself up,"

Jonesy advises. "You are too dumb to find your way out of a bucket. Faceless will only get sore if he has to go looking for you on top of everything else you done to him."

I am aghast, and also disgusted.

"I didn't ask to be his messenger!" I shout.

He pounds on the bar. "Go out in the street. I don't want blood all over the floor."

I scream, "I'm not bleeding!"

"You will be when Faceless gets here."

"Then hide me someplace."

"Dubois," Jonesy says, wiggling his foolish mustache, "when they operate on your head it'll go *sssst*, like a can of coffee."

"Nobody's going to—" I start. Then the door slams open and Faceless stalks in. He is flanked by Gunny Smith and another tough, gun-toting hood. I am pinned against the bar by three pairs of hard eyes.

The world turns gray and my heels start to skid. That is the last I remember for a time.

When I come to I am lying on the pool table and Jonesy is slapping me in the puss with a wet towel. I stare up at him and I am sure, for a second, that I am dead and gone to the swamp end of the Elysian Fields.

Then I hear Faceless say, "He's comin' to. Get my little pal a beer, Jonesy."

I twist my neck and look at Faceless. He is leering down at me with the matchstick jutting up and he is making that odd type of curious noise, like broken cogs grinding up a cylinder block, that I recognize as a chuckle.

But the big thing that registers on my brain is that Faceless is not sore. Nobody is cocking cannons at me.

Faceless sits me up and brushes my threads.

"Little chum," he says, handing me the Jackson, "That was a brainstorm, bombing Roxy's safe. I got to hand it to you. You burned ever'thing, including my IOUs."

And Mrs. Sherpy claimed the entire twenny bucks.

Coming Soon:

Introducing America's Newest Female Detective in
RETURN TO MURDER by Patty Brisco

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by JERRY JACOBSON

Not A Shred Of Evidence

The investigation was about to climax in a series of mass arrests. All the Prosecutor had to do was to get to the office in time, and find his witness. . .

NO ONE in the prosecuter's office would have ever been the wiser about Lancelot Mutual Funds and Securities had Miss Sissy Warlowe's boy friend not given her the fast-shuffle, the double-talk, the run-around and finally the cold shoulder. It was strictly according to the book.

I'd seen hundreds of bad companies topple and all of them keel over in the same direction—from the crumbling of an insignificant but key brick in an already shakey foundation.

The boyfriend was Martin Vanni, head of Lancelot's Auditing and Internal Control —fancy-dresser, a mover and shaker, a man with a golden tongue for any situation. And a man with a wife.

Sissy Warlowe knew about the wife, and about Vanni's

whirlwind upward movement at Lancelot, and about the bogus investors' portfolios, phony holding companies, public official tax bribes, and debenture sales without collateral to back them up.

Horace Lancelot ran a one-man show, Vanni was the slick up-and-comer with all the figures in his Harvard head, and the rest of the firm's employes were left pretty much to paddle their own oars in the dark.

In Lancelot's auditing section, Sissy Warlowe was closer to things than she imagined and closer than Lancelot and Vanni realized. And she was a jealous woman who kept to a strict time-table about little things like promises of divorce and marriage. She sensed Vanni's act was a playboy's stall, but she didn't want to admit it.

Vanni took her too lightly, never suspecting any mere middle-echelon, straw-brained woman would ever know as much about Lancelot Mutual Funds than Lancelot and Vanni put together. Everyone was making mistakes.

But the prosecutor's office wasn't making any now. The instant the State Securities Division placed Lancelot Mutual Funds and Securities into receivership, I got an okay from the Chief Prosecutor, obtained an armload of injunctions, court orders and writs to secure records, and called Sissy Warlowe on the telephone.

"Miss Warlowe, John Barber, from the prosecutor's office. Hold down the corrupt fort. We're on our way over."

She'd been trying to reach me all morning. Where had I been? I ticked off twelve places without even thinking. And asked her why the urgency when we were hitting them from the blind-side like a slick, pro-type downfield block.

"There's been a leak, Mr. Barber," came the voice, leaping all over the line like a grasshopper on hot pavement. "I don't know where and I don't know how, but it's leaking all over the company."

"How can you tell?"

"Because of the silence. Everybody is locking themselves in their own little cubicles of authority and responsibility. No memos, no phone calls, no intercoms. You know the feeling. You pass people in the halls and they put their heads down or turn away and don't mutter a word. The rats are getting off the ship, Mr. Barber."

"Who else besides Lancelot and Vanni are the fattest ones?" I said.

"Nobody," said Sissy Warlowe. "Lancelot is the king of

the mountain and Martin Vanni's the brain like a walking computer."

"They both still there at the office?"

"Yes, but I'm not holding my breath and the prosecutor's office shouldn't either. If Lancelot can destroy the company's portfolios, stock records, and bogus holding company files—and Martin Vanni can get out of town with what he's got in his head—I'm afraid all you'll be able to get them for is nonpayment of lights, heat and telephone."

"We're on our way over," I said and started to put up the phone when the voice said something more. I jerked it back to my ear. "What was that, Miss Warlowe?"

"There's something else I think you should prepare yourself for, Mr. Barber," came the grim tone. "I mean, it must have been going on all morning, but it didn't dawn on me until I thought about it and checked out my suspicions. That was about twenty minutes ago."

"What is that?"

"Down the west hall, just beyond Martin Vanni's office, there's an auxiliary conference room."

"What about it?"

"Well, it's always locked. I never thought about it much before this afternoon, but it finally struck me that I've never heard or memo-read of a conference ever being held there."

"Is the door marked?"

"Yes. It's marked 'Conference Room 1-A', but the door is self-locking, a key-lock type."

"And you don't have a key to it?" I said.

"No, Mr. Barber."

"Who has?"

"I suspect just Lancelot and Vanni. I mean, that's the blindfold way things are run around here anyway. I can't find any records for the installation of the lock, or for the issuance of keys."

"What about this room, Miss Warlowe?"

"Well, I know for a fact it adjoins Lancelot's office. And that Martin Vanni's office adjoins Lancelot's. And I know also that all morning, girls have been wheeling files and trays of documents and records into both Mr. Lancelot's office and Martin Vanni's. A few minutes before I called you, I found Vanni's office vacant. I let myself in and checked his desk drawers and cabinets."

"What were you looking for?"

"I wasn't sure, really. Something about that mysterious auxiliary conference room, I guess. I was looking for anything and everything and nothing. Now I know what a

headless chicken feels like."

"The point is," I said, perhaps too urgently and harshly, for I had a sickening sense we were dealing in mere minutes now, "what *did you* find?"

"A carbon copy of a purchase order, Mr. Barber. Dated about three months ago. About the time the key-lock was installed in the door of that auxiliary conference room."

"A purchase order for the purchase of what?"

"A paper-shredder," came the icy voice. "The biggest on the market, a Model Floor-XX-250. I mean it is massive, Mr. Barber, because I've seen brochure pictures of it and it's the kind of shredder that would even seem a little ludicrous and pretentious for the biggest corporations in this country."

"But just the right size," I sensed, "for a small firm that wanted to get rid of a moderate amount of papers and records in a very short time."

"It's an animal, Mr. Barber. It's capable of shredding 50,000 pounds of paper, pamphlets or books in a half hour. I went down into the west hall a couple of times this morning and put my ear to the door."

"And?"

"Humming, Mr. Barber. Humming the way the brochures indicate the Floor-XX-250 does when it is in

operation. That would explain the movement of documents and files into Vanni's office all morning. Vanni has been moving them through his office, to Lancelot's and into the private entrance to the auxiliary conference room where the shredder is housed. I even think they purchased that gluttonous monster for just such an eventuality as the uncovering of corporate fraud, or receivership, or court attachment of records."

"I'm on my way over," I told her and hung up quickly.

FIFTEEN MINUTES later, myself, another assistant attorney

in the prosecutor's office, a detective and three city patrolmen barged into the seventh floor suite of offices housing Lancelot Mutual Funds and Securities. Sissy Warlowe was just inside the glass double doors, wringing her hands.

"This way, Mr. Barber. It's still humming, but we'd better hurry."

We went in a half-run the God-awful-long length of the building, then dived into a narrow stretch of hallway. We nipped at Miss Warlowe's flying heels down to the end, then made a right turn, then forty feet more of tiled hallway to the door marked Conference Room 1-A.

I put the side of my head against a crack and pressed until I felt pain. I could hear the humming and whirring. And I could hear occasional squeeks, rustles and footsteps of someone moving about lifting papers and documents from trays and drawers.

Stepping back, I said, "Break it in."

"They won't leave a shred of evidence," said Miss Warlowe, as the three burly patrolmen cracked at the oak slab once, twice, a third time.

On the fourth whack the door gave. The patrolmen fell into the room. The rest of us followed. A man of fifty, balding, with a trim, dark blue suit turned toward us and smiled wanly.

Behind him, the bulky shredder winked lights and hummed, a thing I judged to be at least eight feet across its front and five feet deep. At its wide trough, tongues of paper in thick bricks were disappearing. One of the patrolmen found a plug and yanked it out. The red and yellow lights went out, the humming ceased and the wads of paper stopped moving.

"That's Mr. Lancelot," said Sissy Warlowe, her iron voice a slur and her expression indictingly cruel.

I looked around the room of efficient destruction. "Where's Vanni?"

I caught Lancelot's eyes shift in a glance toward the door behind him.

"Where does that door lead?" I snapped.

"To Lancelot's office and into Mr. Vanni's," Miss Warlowe said, sharply.

I took her arm and jerked her along as we plunged into a room-to-room search. For twenty minutes, five of us looked, following Miss Warlowe's leads and suggestions. Glass mazes and cubicles, unmarked rooms, cafeteria, the executive washroom.

"The executive parking lot!"

screamed Miss Warlowe at one point and so we took the elevator down to street level, but Martin Vanni's sleek Mercedes was still in its marked stall with a cold hood. Even the doorman kept light from being shed. He knew Martin Vanni as well as he knew his own face in a mirror. Martin Vanni hadn't come out of the building since he appeared for work at eight-thirty that morning.

"He knows he's as valuable as Lancelot's data," I said. "A walking corporate audit and computer. Lancelot would want him out of town and out of the way."

Out of the way. Sissy Warlowe and I stared at each other with abysmal looks.

"Not a shred of evidence," I heard her gag, her face sickly pale like egg yoke, her voice a squawk like a bird whose neck was being wrung.

We rode the elevator back up to the seventh floor, with three secretaries, two men with attachés and a messenger in a green uniform. One of the secretaries recognized Miss Warlowe and said hello, but she didn't answer.

Neither of us said a word all the way back up, nor for a long while in the room marked Conference Room 1-A, where the officers were and where the Model Floor XX-250 paper shredder sat fat and satisfied, next to Horace Lancelot who sat in a corner chair trying desperately to keep his eyes on the hard, tile floor.

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by ROBERT HART DAVIS

For the great Honolulu Detective, Charlie Chan, not even the lights of Paris could cast a glow into the darkness surrounding the contestants in the deadliest game of chess ever played, a game where twisted ambitions made the opening moves, and where the word "checkmate" indeed meant the death of the king!

PRICE OF SILENCE

He was a quiet man, lived a quiet life — with a wife who had a very lurid past . . .

by

HERBERT HARRIS

THE NOTE, like the envelope in which it had arrived, was not written in normal handwriting script but printed in square impersonal letters, and within seconds of reading it, the face of Jeremy Frensham had become a white bloodless mask.

"I feel sure the newspapers," the note ran, *"would be glad to hear of the whereabouts of Christina Bayliss."*

That was all it said, but for the man who had found it in his morning mail, it was enough. Frensham pushed the remains of his breakfast aside, suddenly feeling sick.

Eight years ago, the name of Christina Bayliss had featured on all the front pages as a woman involved in an unsavory murder case.

She had been a model, a film starlet. The show-business world knew that she was the mistress of a well-known film producer at the time the latter was discovered stabbed to death in his Mayfair apartment.

The little-known ash-blonde actress became big news when she was held in custody on suspicion of killing her lover. Because of her glamor and sex-appeal, the newspapers kept the story going, and were able to enlist public sympathy for her.

Christina Bayliss had continually protested that she was innocent. It was true she had been a woman of easy virtue, she said, it was true that she had been the producer's mistress, but she had not been anywhere near the murdered man for several days before the tragedy.

In due course the police realized there was not sufficient evidence to bring the girl to justice, and she was released. Soon the name of Christina Bayliss became only back-page news, and then it thundered back to the front pages when one of her former lovers confessed to the crime, saying he had stabbed the producer out of jealousy.

The murderer was tried and given a life-sentence. Scotland Yard closed the file on the case. The girl who had become notorious through it now vanished from the public eye, and infrequent attempts to track her down failed.

There could be very few who knew where Christina Bayliss now was. Jeremy Frensham was one of them. He had married her.

He looked upon this note which had come to him out of the blue with a terrible sickness in his inside. He realized that someone, somewhere would demand a price for his silence.

Christina was now Grace, which had been his mother's name. The former ash-blonde hair—dyed in her show-business days—had reverted to the dark chestnut which was her natural color.

He had thought he was safe. It was utterly imperative that he *should* be safe. Any taint of scandal would be ruinous to a man in his position.

Frensham occupied an enviable place in both local and national politics. He had been Mayor of the town in which he was king-pin. His business employed a third of the town's population.

He was a highly respected member of the Chamber of Commerce, the church, the local college's board of governors, and other bodies that held him in esteem. Frensham, they said, was due for the highest honors, and what a charming cultured lady Grace Frensham was, they said, what a wonderful help to her husband in his career.

He got up, pale and shaken, from the breakfast-table, and went up to his wife's room. He stood looking at her for a while as she combed her hair before the mirror.

She was less glamorous than she had been in her ash-blonde days, less vital, less captivating. Still quite a beautiful woman, but colder, more off-putting.

Seeing him in the mirror, she turned slowly. "What is it, Jeremy? Are you all right?"

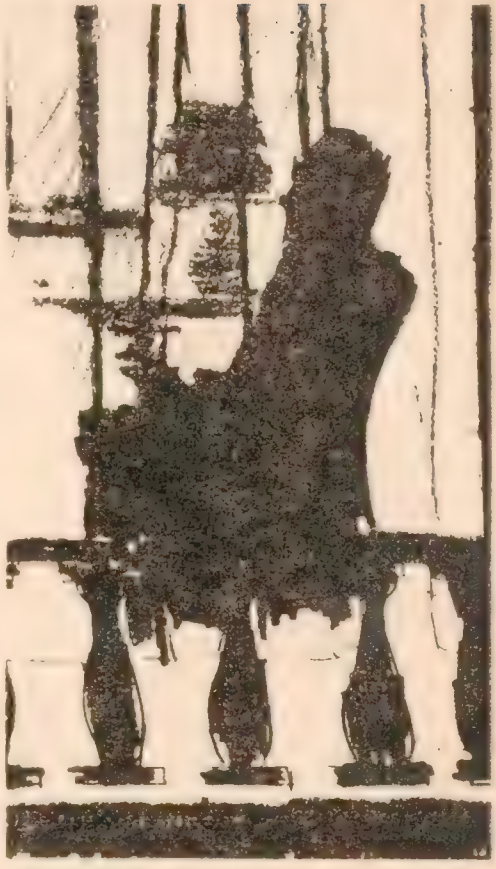
The note was clenched in his fist inside his pocket. He had meant to mention it to her, but now he decided to say nothing until later. After all, the blackmailer hadn't asked for any money. . .not yet.

"I got up with a slight hangover or something. I'm okay now. I'm going to the office early."

"Yes. Very well."

He paused for a moment as she turned back to her hair-combing. There was no passion in their love now, only an emptiness. Of course, all her affection, all her *real* love, went to Peter, their son, now seven.

Acting the part of Mrs. Frensham, she was ideal. And why shouldn't she be good at that sort of thing?—she was an actress, wasn't she? But unfortunately, she was also Christina Bayliss. . . .



He went to the office, as he said he would, much earlier than usual. And in the elegant well-furnished room with "Chairman" on the door he sat with his chin in his palm, thinking hard.

Could the blackmailer be somebody in the firm? There was the man who looked after his public relations; he had been a newspaperman once. One of his secretaries was married to a policeman.

His mind ranged over all the

possibilities—the people who worked for him who might have been involved with the murder case, former friends of his wife.

Frenshaw thought until his mind went dizzy. He found himself glaring at the portrait of his wife on the desk. Marrying her, he now told himself, had been the greatest folly of his life.

It had been pure infatuation, of course.

From the moment he had first met her at that party in London, he had done nothing but think about her. She had never been in love with him, he knew that.

She had, if anything, done everything to brush him off. He had always gone back for a further rebuff, though. He had been determined to make her love him.

Then had come that sensational murder case. Strangely enough, a blessing in disguise for him at that time. He had stood by her, had actually put up money—secretly—for her defence.

It had all been terribly discreet. Not a soul had known who he was, this stranger on whose shoulder she leaned. Perhaps it was out of gratitude she had finally agreed to marry him. After all, he had enabled her to disappear, guided her all along the line in what she should do.

Not a soul had recognised Christina Bayliss in Grace Frensham. Not a soul? Well, one person knew. . .one poisonous person who would shortly present his bill. . .the price of silence.

That evening, when he obviously had little appetite for his dinner, Christina asked: "Is something the matter, Jeremy?"

There was bitterness in his eyes when he looked at her. He saw her as the menacing shadow over his future, his success, all he held dear. If she hadn't been such a little tramp. . . .

"Mother's bringing Peter home tomorrow," Christina said, ignoring her earlier question. Their son had been on a short holiday in the country.

"I'm well aware of my son's movements," Frensham answered brusquely.

"Your son? He's mine too, remember," she snapped back. "But I begin to realize that you rather regret I'm his mother."

"Possibly I do," he countered through clenched teeth. He got up abruptly from the dinner-table and strode from the room.

THE NEXT morning's mail brought the follow-up note he had expected.

"Five thousand is the price. One lump sum. No more. Five hundred tenners. Leave them in a package in the hollow tree at the south end of the sports-field at nine o'clock tonight."

The amount didn't shock him unduly. Five thousand was not so very much after all. The blackmailer could probably get more for selling his information.

And he *could* afford such an amount, fortunately. His father had left him not only a successful business but a staggering amount of capital.

Raising the cash should not present too much difficulty. There was at least twice that amount in his personal deposit account kept for emergencies, and the bank manager was a model of discretion.

The manager, a ersonal friend, said: "Quite a sum to want in cash, Mr. Frensham. A hot tip?" He smiled blandly at his own joke.

Frensham smiled back. "A chance to buy what I believe to be a valuable picture, and I have to act fast. The seller wants cash."

The five hundred ten-pound notes made a surprisingly small package, he found.

Once again, when dinner time came round, he had little taste for food. Christina said flatly, "You seem to have lost your appetite altogether. Why don't you say what's wrong? What have I done now that you don't approve of?"

Frensham eyed her angrily. "Have you met any of your old gang just lately? Somebody who knew you before we got married?"

"Of course I haven't! Don't you think I'd have told you?"

"You're quite sure?"

"Certain! What's the matter?"

He was on the point of telling about the blackmail notes, about the cash he was going to hand over. But no, he thought, that sounded like weakness. He hated to appear weak before Christina.

Presently he left her. "I shan't be back until later on," he growled. "I'm meeting somebody at the club."

"Very well." Her calmness only served to irritate him further.

At nine o'clock he dropped the package of money in the hollow tree close to the sports-field. It was a dark night, without a moon, and Frensham had parked his car a hundred yards away and walked to the tree.

He stood behind a hedge and waited. If the blackmailer turned up, he might be able to recognize him. A pity it was so dark—it was possible, he reflected bitterly, that he might

not be able to distinguish any features after all.

And what did it matter, anyway? He couldn't take any action. If he did, the whole sordid business would come to light. . .all the raked-up dirt about Christina Bayliss. . . .

Frensham waited only fifteen minutes or so. Then, because he was shivering with cold, he gave up the vigil, returned to his car and drove to his club.

He drank several whiskies and felt in a slightly more cheerful frame of mind. At about ten-thirty, burning with curiosity, he drove back to the sports-field, and walked to the hollow tree.

The package of money had gone.

When morning came, he debated if he should stay home and welcome the return of his son Peter. But he finally decided against it.

It meant meeting Christina's mother, who had always plainly disapproved of him, regarding him as too old for Christina and too dull. He realized too that his son Peter was growing away from him.

No doubt Christina and her mother—who had always been clannish—had brain-washed the kid into treating his father with disrespect.

So Frensham didn't hurry back from the office. In fact, he arrived home much later than usual. Peter would probably be in bed, which was just as it should be. The boy would be tired and fretful, he reckoned.

The house was uncommonly quiet—almost gruesomely silent. He searched all the rooms and found nobody there. It was as he was calling "Grace! Grace!" with a peevish impatience that he noticed the envelope propped against the antique clock on the mantelshelf.

There was something familiar about the envelope. He had a strange crawling presentiment as he pulled out the letter. Even that paper was familiar. . .the same azure blue.

"Thank you for the money, Jeremy. Mother and I and Peter left the country by means of an old friend's yacht this morning. You won't want to stir anything up because of your precious reputation. You will think of a good excuse, I feel sure. Meanwhile I shall try to find some happiness in a place you will never find me. 'The Blackmailer'. . . Your Wife."

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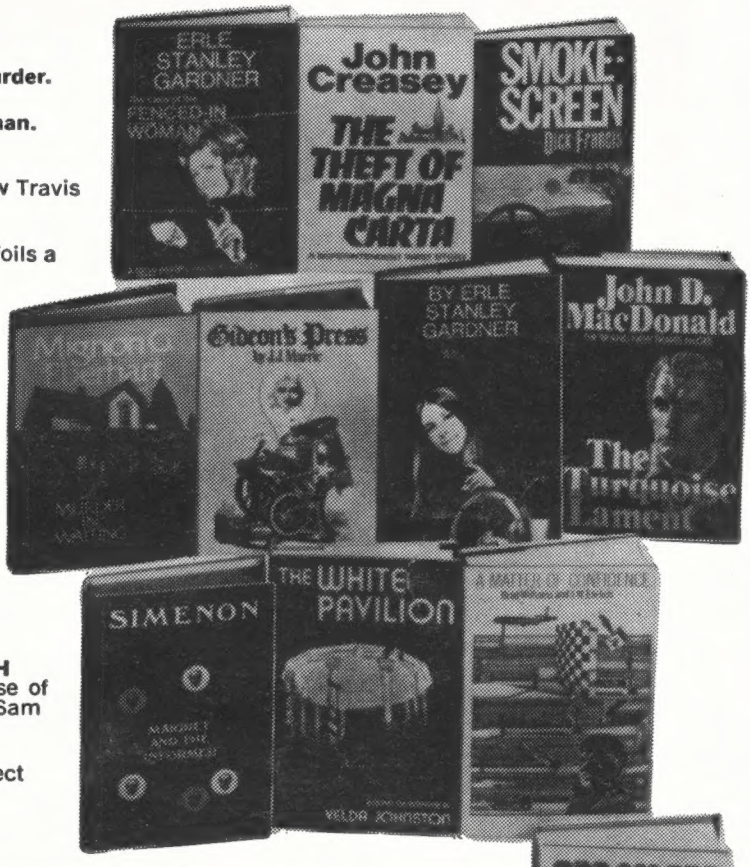

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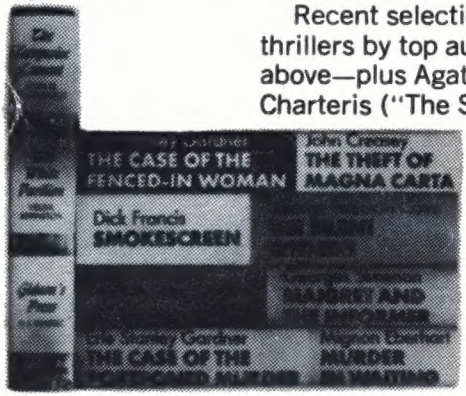

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